

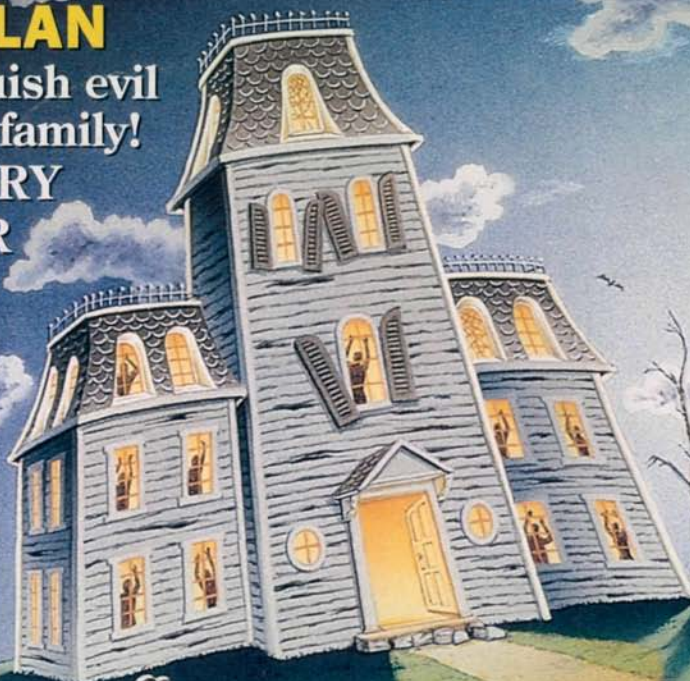
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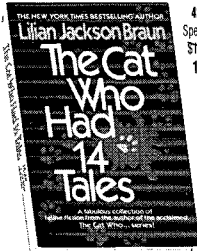


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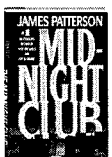
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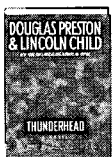
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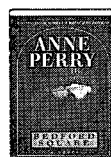
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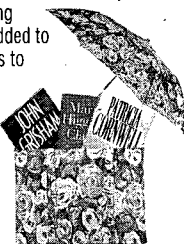
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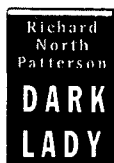


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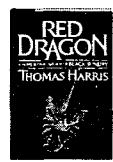
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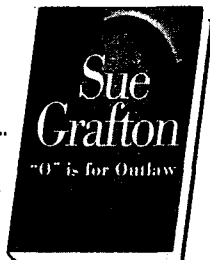
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# EDITOR'S NOTES

Cathleen Jordan

Once more Halloween is in the air, and this issue comes complete with a ghost or two, a vampire or two, a witch or two (more, actually).

And then there's the eleventh century skeleton. "The Samhain Skeleton," to be precise, brought to us by a new author, Charlotte Skelton. (No relation.)

Ms. Skelton, who is English, tells us that she lives "in a cottage, overlooking Cley Hill, an Iron Age hill fort." She was educated at the University of London, Goldsmiths' College, and spent seventeen years teaching music. "Retired in 1992—the throat couldn't cope any more!" At present she is an academic secretary, Department of Biology and Biochemistry, at the University of Bath, reviews historical mysteries for the Troutworks Web site at [www.MysteryGuide.com](http://www.MysteryGuide.com), and contributes a quarterly column to

*Murder: Past Tense*, the journal of the Historical Mystery Appreciation Society.

"The Case of the Headless Witness," which sounds as if it ought to be a Halloween story though it isn't, is our first in many years by Lloyd Biggle, Jr., who wrote two stories for AHMM in the fifties.

Mr. Biggle is very well-known as a writer of science fiction, but he has also written five detective novels (most recently *Where Dead Soldiers Walk*, published by St. Martin's in 1994) including two Sherlock Holmes tales. "I'm a trained historian," he tells us. "I have a huge library of books from late Edwardian and Victorian England," upon which he drew for "The Case of the Headless Witness."

In addition, Mr. Biggle has a Ph.D. in musicology from the University of Michigan.

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**I**t was a Sunday morning in June 1901, and I had reported to my employer, Lady Sara Varnly, for my daily instructions. It was a frustrating time for all of us. Lady Sara's immense network of informers had been turning up so little of interest that we'd begun to wonder whether London's criminals had unanimously conspired to take their holidays early. We were hopeful that Saturday night's reports would provide at least one crime worth contemplating, but thus far their ingenuity had not risen above the level of petty sordidness. As we talked, I chanced to glance out the window at normally nondescript and peaceful Connaught Mews.

Lady Sara noticed my astonished expression and was at my side instantly. Coming to a stop before her door was the most elaborate carriage that humble mews had seen in months. A splendidly matched pair of white horses stomped impatiently while overly tall, uniformed footmen diligently assisted the passengers to dismount. First came Chief Inspector Robert Mewer, Lady Sara's official contact at Scotland Yard, followed by Sir Edward Henry, who had been brought from India to introduce his system of fingerprinting and who, only a month before, had assumed the position of assistant commissioner and head of the Criminal Investigation Department, the C.I.D. Then came Sir Edward Bradford, commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, already a legend in his lifetime—when his arm was mangled by a tiger on a hunt in India, he had it amputated without an anesthet-

ic—and, bringing up the rear and lord of all he surveyed—it obviously was his carriage—was the Home Secretary himself, Mr. C. T. Ritchie, looking, as he always did, as though he wished he were elsewhere.

"The Bank of England has been robbed!" Lady Sara exclaimed.

It did seem that nothing less serious would have brought so much police authority to Lady Sara's door.

Probably it was Inspector Mewer who ignored the bell pull and administered a knock that jarred the building.

"Sit down," Lady Sara said to me. "We haven't finished our discussion." I probably raised my eyebrows. "The last time I called on the Home Secretary he kept me waiting twenty minutes," Lady Sara said. "In deference to his age I'll make him wait only ten."

Charles Tupper, one of her footmen—Rick Allward was the other, and both of them were highly capable investigators—appeared a moment later to inform Lady Sara that she had visitors. He reeled off their names with a blankly innocent expression.

"Do they seem impetuous?" Lady Sara asked.

"Very. Rick invited them to sit down, but all four of them are pacing the floor."

"They need to be taught patience. Please tell them I will see them as soon as possible."

She made them wait the full ten minutes. Then we descended to her study, where we found them still pacing. Lady Sara quickly got them seated at the large oaken conference table in the center of the room.



It was the Home Secretary's first visit to Lady Sara's headquarters, and he looked about him distastefully. Like her living quarters upstairs, her study was sparsely furnished. There was no clutter, and everything there had a place and a use. The walls were lined with books on every conceivable subject because every aspect of human knowledge has some bearing on crime and criminals.

His gaze finally came to rest on a strangely fashioned object that lay in the center of the table. It was an enormous, and immensely complicated, cribbage board that had been invented by Lady Sara's father, the Earl of Ranisford. It was, in fact, the world's largest cribbage board, and the earl had designed it for a six-handed game of cribbage that he'd invented. Now it was used by Lady Sara to record her progress in solving crimes. The board's six tracks could accommodate six investigations simultaneously. Unfortunately, none of the tracks was in use.

It was a strange gathering. Lady Sara was her youthful and beautiful self despite her forty-plus years and the simplicity of her gown and coiffure, but the four men looked as though they had dressed for church the previous evening and spent the night in their clothing. Not only were they burdened by the cares of office or profession, but they had been suddenly aged by some new crisis. Only a matter of critical importance would have moved them to call unannounced, so Lady Sara wasted no time on formalities. "It might save time if my employees

heard the problem directly from you," she said. "Have you any objections to that?"

They had none, so she quickly introduced us. "Colin Quick, my secretary; Charles Tupper and Rick Allward, investigators." She always gave us whatever titles seemed appropriate. We took our places at the table, and there was a long moment of silence. Then three of the callers turned to Chief Inspector Mewer, who, when he saw that he was nominated, opened his notebook, cleared his throat, and began.

The chief inspector knew how to formulate a police report, but he had no notion at all of how to come to a point quickly. "Shortly after two o'clock this morning, Constable Padraic Cahill was walking his usual beat on Cheapside. He had come from Newgate Street, and at the intersection with St. Martin's-le-Grand, he met Constable John Snell, as was customary. The time, as noted by Constable Snell, was one fifty-seven. It had been a quiet night, and neither man had observed anything of special interest. Snell had reached the end of his beat; he turned back toward Aldersgate Street. Cahill proceeded along Cheapside, and Snell neither saw nor heard anything further of him.

"Our next witness is Constable Edward Price, whose beat runs along King Street and Queen Street. He customarily met Constable Cahill at the Cheapside intersection. The time was two thirty when he reached it. There was no sign of Cahill. Price walked a short distance down Cheapside toward Newgate Street, looking for



him and listening. It was possible, of course, that Cahill had made an arrest and marched the culprit away or that he had responded to a distant constable's whistle that Price had been too far away to hear. Price neither saw nor heard anything unusual, so, properly, he continued his own patrol along Queen Street.

"At the end of his beat Price met his sergeant. Sergeant Charles Gossard, who was making his own rounds and checking up on his constables. Price had nothing to report except the failure of Constable Cahill to meet him. By that time it was after three o'clock. Gossard went to Cheapside immediately to look for Cahill. The street was quiet and all but deserted. The sergeant found two vagrants asleep in a doorway near Bow Lane and awakened them; neither had seen a constable, and neither had any idea how long he had been there. If Constable Cahill had passed them, he would have packed them off. The sergeant sent for assistance and organized a proper search—not only along Cheapside but also along the side streets where Cahill might have turned off—Bread Street, Cow Lane, Wood Street, Gutter Lane, Foster Lane, and their various offshoots. He found no trace whatsoever of Constable Cahill. No constable on patrol in the area had heard a police whistle.

"It was almost six o'clock by then, and information came from an entirely unexpected quarter, Chelsea. A hansom driver, one Chad Orling, saw something exceedingly strange as he approached the intersection

of Fulham Road and Sewell Walk. Looked like some bloke standing in a 'ole,' he said. He pulled on the reins to guide the horse around it, but at that moment the horse went crazy. It reared repeatedly, and it was all he could do to get it under control again. At the same moment one Emmett Flynn, driving a four-wheeler and approaching from the opposite direction, had an identical problem with *his* horse. The ruckus made by the two rearing horses attracted the attention of Constable Jed Lowson, patrolling some distance away, and he came at a run to investigate. The object that alarmed the horses proved to be a human head held upright in a small frame of wood. And the head was that of Constable Padraic Cahill."

"How was the head severed?" Lady Sara asked.

"The division surgeon thinks it was done with an axe—wielded by an experienced person, since the head was severed with only a couple of strokes."

"Unlike some of the executions history describes," Lady Sara observed dryly. "I assume he was dead when he was beheaded. Were there any indications on the head of what killed him?"

"There were no signs of a head injury, if that's what you mean. The surgeon thinks he may have been strangled."

"His body will tell us—if we find it. His body is the missing witness in this case." Then she added, "Cheapside is a main thoroughfare. Didn't passersby observe anything out of the ordinary?"

"The normal heavy traffic bound





for the docks or the markets doesn't occur on Sunday morning. Traffic would have been light, but certainly there should have been *some* traffic. We haven't found anyone who saw anything, and no one has come forward with information. It is still early for that kind of investigation, of course. We may have to appeal to the public for assistance."

"Was Constable Cahill married?" Lady Sara asked.

"He was," Chief Superintendent Mewer said. "With four young children. His wife took it hard, as is to be expected. She is in hospital, and neighbors are looking after the children." He added, "From all I am able to find out, Constable Cahill was a very steady, reliable man."

"The most tragic aspects of any crime," Lady Sara murmured, "are in its ramifications. A crime is like a whirlpool. Not only are the criminals and their victims engulfed, but a widening circle of innocent dependents and bystanders are sucked in as well."

The four men gazed solemnly at her. The Home Secretary said sententiously, "We can't have this, you know. A police constable abducted and decapitated. It won't do at all. We are throwing every resource available to us into the investigation, and we—the entire force—would appreciate it if you would help us."

"We know you have extensive resources of your own," Sir Edward Bradford said. "We also know you have sources of information the police can't touch."

Lady Sara turned to Rick and Charles. "Start at once. Charles to

Cheapside, Rick to Chelsea. Gather all the assistance you can find, and listen for a buzz."

Both of them hurried away.

The Home Secretary was regarding her with puzzlement. "A buzz?"

"A rumor," Lady Sara said curtly. "Idle talk of any kind. Unfortunately, many citizens lose both their voices and their memories when they think the police are listening, but the street people who will be helping Rick and Charles may be able to pick up something. Now then."

She leaned back and thought for a moment. "The Metropolitan Inner Circle Underground doesn't run after midnight. The murderers had time to walk from Cheapside to Chelsea if they didn't dawdle, but more likely they walked a short distance and then hailed a cab. They could have followed a devious route with a series of cabs. You must interview every cab driver in Greater London who was on duty at the time and ask about a passenger with a large hatbox or suitcase."

"You are assuming they killed Cahill somewhere near Cheapside and transported only the head to Chelsea," Sir Edward Bradford said. "We don't know that."

"Of course not, but it is the simpler solution. A man's head can be carried about much less conspicuously than his whole body. If the murderers were wise, they disposed of the body at once. Cheapside is not all that distant from the river. Wherever the decapitation was done, there are three main questions we have to deal with: why Constable Cahill, why did he



have to die, and why Chelsea? Despite the fact that he was both steady and reliable, it is always possible that some personal crisis overtook him while he was walking his beat. You will have to go into his private life thoroughly."

"We have already started," Chief Inspector Mewer said.

"Then I will leave that investigation to you, and I will concentrate on my three questions: why Cahill, why did he have to die, and why Chelsea?" She got to her feet. "I will report whenever I have anything to report. For now, all of us have work to do. Good morning, gentlemen."

Normally she would have offered refreshments of some kind and let them talk as long as they liked. On this morning she was in a hurry to start her own investigation.

The men thanked her and filed out. She said to me, "First, we must have a careful look at both locations. That may suggest something to us."

The word "cheap" originally meant "good value," and in medieval times Cheapside was London's original market, a fact reflected in the names of nearby streets: Bread, Milk, Wood, Poultry, Cow, Cornhill, Ironmonger. Goldsmith's Hall is nearby, as is Threadneedle Street. Almost until the nineteenth century Cheapside was the bustling center of London's economy; then it gradually lost out to the more stylish new establishments in the West End.

It was still a bustling market street on weekdays, crammed on either side with buildings of four to six stories whose ground and often

upper floors were occupied by shops and business concerns. It seemed that every possible need could be satisfied there. It perfectly illustrated Dr. Samuel Johnson's remark, "There is in London all that life can afford."

On Sunday morning the bustle was missing. There were a few stragglers from an overly liquefied Saturday night. There also were well-dressed people on their way to an early service at St. Mary-le-Bow, one of the beautiful churches designed by Christopher Wren.

We descended from Lady Sara's carriage at the intersection with St. Martin's-le-Grand. It seemed appropriate that this search for murderers of a police constable should begin at the statue of Sir Robert Peel, who—as Home Secretary in the 1820's—reorganized the London police force.

As we walked slowly along Cheapside, I thought of Constable Cahill walking his dimly lit beat, and I kept asking myself what sort of criminal activity he could have happened onto that resulted in his death. There was nothing fancy about the Cheapside shops and businesses, but they perfectly summarized life in London in the year 1901. There was an establishment that offered baths, a barbershop, a news agent, a book dealer who seemed to deal mostly in second-hand books, a tobacconist, a grocer, a furrier, a millinery shop, a clothier, a chemist, a jeweler, a stationer, a butcher, a baker, a toy shop, a confectioner, a dealer in wines and spirits, a draper, a tailor, an office of Keith, Prowse, and Company, tick-



et agents—everything that life could afford was indeed available there. You could buy new shoes or a cobbler would repair the ones you were wearing while you waited. You could get yourself fitted with a truss or have glasses made, outfit your office or your flat, visit your bank, buy artificial teeth. You could sample special blends of tea or coffee. You could select provisions for your Sunday dinner or dine at any of a variety of restaurants. You could buy a new umbrella or have an old one recovered. You could buy new clothing or used clothing or have what you were wearing made more presentable.

But of course you could not do any of those things at two o'clock on Sunday morning. The crowds of business and professional men, the shopkeepers, clerks, customers, and passersby were gone, but the stage set and all its props remained, and somewhere in the dimly lighted streets and darkened buildings Constable Cahill had seen something that led to his death.

Lady Sara paused to look into a vacant shop. The window, below a large TO LET sign, was plastered with advertisements. The interior seemed to be empty.

"The constable could have discovered vagrants who had broken into vacant premises in search of a place to sleep," I suggested.

Lady Sara glanced sharply at me. "A vagrant would be unlikely to murder a police constable—and risk getting himself hanged—just to avoid a few days in jail, which would be nothing to him. And why would a vagrant decapitate his vic-

tim and spirit the head away to Chelsea? Why not dispose of the head the same way the body was disposed of—which seems to have been efficiently done, since an intense police search has turned up nothing."

"Even a vagrant could get violently angry over what he considered unjust treatment," I protested.

"The same could be said of a burglar who would face a long prison term. We are bound to look first for something much more significant—a crime of overwhelming importance for which discovery by a constable meant disaster to a promising enterprise and so gravely threatened those taking part that the constable had to die. Keep asking yourself what Constable Cahill could have seen."

We had reached Foster Lane, and Lady Sara turned into it. Near Cheapside there was the same clutter of business establishments. She stood there for a moment, scrutinizing establishments on both sides of the street.

Often I can follow Lady Sara's unspoken reasoning easily—up to a point—but her conclusions always leave me far behind. As Chief Inspector Mewer had pointed out, the procession of wagons to the markets and the docks, which goes on all night before every weekday, wouldn't have occurred early Sunday morning, but there should have been *some* traffic even if widely scattered. If a criminal wanted to avoid witnesses, he would keep to the side streets. Therefore it was entirely possible that after meeting Constable Snell, Cahill noticed





something down a side street and went to investigate.

But what and where? The buildings along Foster Lane faced each other across the narrow street like rows of hieroglyphics waiting for someone to read them. I could only scrutinize them helplessly—if they had witnessed a horrible event early that morning, they weren't revealing it to me. It was difficult to say what Lady Sara saw. She often kept her observations to herself until the time came to arrange them into a case.

The constable could have seen something inside a shop, tried the door, found it open, gone in to investigate—and met his doom somewhere in the rear where a passerby wouldn't notice.

"Would Cahill have blown his whistle if he found signs of a break-in?" I asked.

"Perhaps if it were a flagrant break-in and the shop contained something extremely valuable. It depends on the circumstances and what he saw."

He wouldn't have blown his whistle for an unlocked door, I thought. He would have investigated, thinking it had been left unlocked by mistake—and he could have been murdered by a dishonest employee he found inside the store. But why would that employee chop off his head and take it to Chelsea?

We continued to walk along Cheapside and venture into side streets. Lady Sara seemed to be giving her closest scrutiny to jewelry stores, where merchandise of extremely high value could be carried off in a burglar's pockets, and

to pubs, dealers in wines and spirits, and similar shops where a heavy volume of late Saturday business sometimes resulted in a large amount of money's being left in the till by an incautious proprietor. A burglar about to make the haul of his professional career might be expected to react violently if disturbed by a police constable.

Having followed Lady Sara's unspoken chain of logic that far, I again found myself face-to-face with two of her questions: why cut off the constable's head, and why take it to Chelsea?

At the corner of Cow Lane was an establishment whose sign read GEO. MELLOR, JOB PRINTER, ADVERTISING POSTERS OUR SPECIALTY. The window was crowded with splendid multicolored posters displaying the printer's art. There also were rather ordinary examples of letterheads, bullheads, imprinted envelopes, and calling cards.

We turned into Cow Lane. The shop behind the printshop seemed to be used for storage: pasteboard boxes were stacked along the walls and on top of a large table that stood in the center of the room. The window was framed by heavy drapes that opened to either side, and the heavy curtain on the door was raised. No doubt these had been left behind by the shop's former occupant. Lady Sara paused to contemplate this arrangement.

A helpful passerby told us, "That's part of the printshop. The entrance is in front. Closed today, of course." We thanked him.

"Nothing there worth stealing," I observed.



"Unless you are a printer," was Lady Sara's comment.

We walked a short distance along Cow Lane and then returned to Cheapside. At the corner of Wood Street were four venerable two-story buildings that had been built in 1687, shortly after the Great Fire of 1666 had destroyed most of the buildings in this area. Behind the end house was a plane tree, as remarkable a survivor as the buildings. Lady Sara gave much scrutiny and thought to the yard behind the building where the tree was growing. We explored Wood Street briefly and continued this process all the way to King and Queen streets, though Constable Cahill had not reached them. Then we turned back and followed the same procedure on the opposite side of Cheapside with Bow Lane and Bread Street.

At New Change we met Charles Tupper, who looked weary and discouraged. His helpers had turned up nothing at all. "Awkward day to investigate anyone but a clergyman," he said. "I was wondering if Cahill could have noticed a burglary in process and tried to arrest the perpetrators. Since it's Sunday, evidence of it won't be discovered until the shop opens tomorrow."

"It is an awkward day," Lady Sara agreed. "On the other hand, I am certain the police will have checked entrances and windows of every establishment in Cheapside and all of the connecting streets for signs of forcible entry."

Charles shrugged eloquently. None of that was of any help to him. "Where *are* the police?" he asked. "I

haven't seen a constable or a detective since I arrived here."

"They worked here most of the night," Lady Sara said. "They have already investigated everything they could think of and gone to Chelsea. Probably they have finished with Chelsea also. If they had developed any leads at all, they wouldn't have asked for my help. Keep listening. When the taverns and public houses open, you may have better luck. Come, Colin."

She signaled to Old John Quick, her waiting coachman and my foster father, and a moment later we were on our way to Chelsea.

We rattled through streets that were all but deserted at that time of Sunday morning except for churchgoers, past St. Paul's, Ludgate Hill, Fleet Street, the Strand, the Mall, Constitution Hill, Hyde Park Corner, Knightsbridge, and the Brompton Road. Finally we reached Fulham Road. Along the way, I kept wondering about the murderers. Had they hurriedly walked all this distance carrying Constable Cahill's head in a box or case of some kind, or had they taken a circuitous route with the help of a series of cabs? At the intersection of Fulham Road and Sewell Walk we found Rick Allward waiting not for us but for one of his informers.

"I have a buzz!" he said happily.

Lady Sara invited him to get into the carriage and tell us about it.

"It isn't a very loud buzz," he began apologetically, "but a buzz nevertheless. And it didn't happen Saturday night but Friday night. To be exact, shortly after midnight on Fri-



day. A woman who resides in Sewell Walk got up to look after a crying baby, and she heard some kind of altercation in the street. She looked out and saw three people, two men and a woman." He paused. "One of the men was swinging a large sword."

There was a lengthy silence while both Rick and I waited for Lady Sara's reaction. "Chief Inspector Mewer said the constable's head was severed with two strokes of an axe," she said finally. "Would a sword have served the same purpose? Perhaps so if it were heavy enough and sharp enough."

"You are moving our equation back in time. Rather, you are adding to it. Now it reads: Shortly after midnight on Friday a man was swinging a sword in Sewell Walk. Early Sunday morning a police constable disappeared from Cheapside. Later Sunday morning his head was found in Chelsea at the intersection of Sewell Walk and Fulham Road. Is that how you construct it?"

Rick nodded. "The sword may've had nothing to do with it, but its being swung in Sewell Walk seems almost too much of a coincidence. It shouldn't be difficult to trace the prior history of the sword. I'm waiting for word about that now."

"It might tell us how the sword happened to come into the possession of the man who was swinging it on Friday night—but not whether he was also swinging it early Sunday morning if indeed he was."

"It ought to tell us who he is or show us a way to find out," Rick said. "Then we can ask him where and when he swung it and why."

"That would be an excellent step toward resolving the equation," Lady Sara said. "Please continue. Colin and I will have a look at Sewell Walk."

We drove all the way to Onslow Gardens and then walked back toward Fulham Road. Sewell Walk was a street of large detached residences, many of which offered rooms to let. Since it was Chelsea, these were called artists' studios. Each house had a small garden in front, and flowers were blooming lavishly. It was as ordinary a London street as one could imagine, but when I considered that it was a street in Chelsea, London's Bohemia, even the sword became commonplace.

As we approached Fulham Road, we found several houses being used for commercial purposes. Lady Sara nudged me. "Look! A link with Cheapside!"

The lower level of one house, reached by an areaway, had windows that extended just above ground level. A sign read JAMES ARLOTT, JOB PRINTING.

I said indifferently, "Why not? There are printers scattered all over London."

"Job printers aren't all that common. They have to attract business from a considerable area because it takes a huge number of orders for calling cards and posters to meet the printer's overhead and give him a decent living. A sword being swung in Sewell Walk the night before Constable Cahill's severed head was found there is a coincidence. Now we have a second coincidence. Constable Cahill disap-





peared near a printshop in Cheap-side, and his head was found near a printshop in Chelsea. How many coincidences are required before we start taking them seriously? Two? Three? A dozen?"

"I would want a trifle more evidence before I tried to make something of that one," I said.

"We are collecting the evidence now. The two printers certainly are a fact to make note of."

At the Fulham Road corner Rick was talking with a tall young woman in an ankle-length gown of bright red with a black shawl. She wore a rose in her long black hair, and there was a definite air of the gypsy about her.

"I don't know her name," the woman said. "I don't know the street number either, but it's in Sewell Walk. I could show you."

Rick explained to us, "This is Myra. She attended a party on Friday night; at the party some people whose names she doesn't know borrowed a sword from the hostess. No doubt it was they who were swinging a sword in the street."

"Excellent!" Lady Sara said. "Could you show us where the party took place?"

"Glad to." Myra strode quickly back the way we had come, along Sewell Walk, and the three of us followed. Near Onslow Gardens she turned in at a house that looked very much like all the others. As she led us up the path, she remarked over her shoulder, "Everyone calls her Queenie. I don't know her last name. She has a party every Friday night."

She knocked vigorously on the

door. Some moments passed before a piping lilt of song could be heard in the passageway beyond. The door opened.

The strangest woman I had ever seen stood there. Her hair was waistlong. She wore a bright green coat and a bright yellow skirt, and tassels in every conceivable color were sewn to the coat. They dangled when she walked, and the effect was something like that of a longhaired yak except that she was small in stature with a figure that was slender, almost elfin.

"These people want to know about your sword," Myra told her. She didn't bother with introductions. Apparently no one in Bohemia ever bothered with introductions. Everyone knew everyone, but no one knew who anyone was.

Myra said, "I have to run," and hurried away with our thanks floating after her.

Queenie looked at the three of us doubtfully. "Please come in," she said.

The house was as queer as she was. The interior looked like an Oriental bazaar, with brazen lamps, candlesticks, bells, gongs, unidentifiable objects arranged everywhere. Lady Sara performed introductions, introducing herself first, and Queenie's eyes opened wide when she heard "Lady." Although every kind of person could be found in London's Bohemia, genuine ladies were evidently rare.

Queenie—we never learned her surname—got us seated and asked, "What was it you wanted to know?"

"Three people were seen in Sewell Walk shortly after midnight on



Friday; one of them was swinging a sword. We are curious about the sword. Where did it come from?"

"The sword was mine," Queenie said. "It came from here." She pointed to a place on the wall. "It's been hanging there for years. Ben—he's an artist, I don't remember his last name—needed it for a picture he's painting, so I lent it to him."

"Who were the other two people?" Lady Sara asked.

"His wife Doll, she's a sculptress, and a young fellow—I think he's a writer, a poet or something. He's new—came for the first time on Friday. I didn't catch his name."

"Did it occur to you that a sword could be a dangerous weapon?" Lady Sara asked.

Queenie tilted back her head and laughed with a tinkling gurgle. "Not that sword. It's a stage prop. It's *huge*, taller than a man, looks like something a crusader might have carried. And it looks real, of course—that's the idea with a stage sword. But it's light and easy to wield, which a stage sword should be. It's actually flimsy."

"Then you don't think it could cause an injury?"

"I think the sword would bend before it hurt anyone."

"I suppose there was plenty to drink at your party," Lady Sara observed. She was trying to account for the midnight antics with the sword in the middle of Sewell Walk.

"Except for Quinn—he's an actor, always drinks whisky—no one had anything but opal hush. We get our exhilaration from talk and singing."

I spoke for the first time. "Opal—hush? What's opal hush?"

"You've never tried opal hush?" she exclaimed. Her expression clearly indicated that I had led an unfortunately sheltered life. "You must try it now. Opal hush for all three of you?" She hurried away without waiting for an answer.

She returned with four wine-glasses, a bottle of red claret, and a syphon. She filled the glasses three-quarters full with the claret and squirted lemonade into each, and a beautiful, iridescent, opal-like foam rose above the top of each glass. "Opal hush!" she chortled delightedly, passing the glasses around.

Lady Sara made small talk with her about her work—she also was a sculptress—while we sipped our opal hushes. I had to agree that one such drink was unlikely to intoxicate anyone to the point of sword swinging.

When we finished, Lady Sara thanked her, and we got to our feet. "I would like to see the sword," she said. "Could you give me the artist's address?"

Queenie frowned. "They moved recently. I have no idea where they are."

"Or the writer's address?"

Queenie shook her head. Bohemia was indeed a strange world. It was restricted to Chelsea, a relatively small area, and not only did no one know who anyone was, but it also seemed that no one knew where anyone lived.

"He arrived with Quinn," Queenie said after some thought. "The actor. Quinn might know. I can give you his address."

She did. With that, we thanked her again and left.



"We probably have as much as we need about the sword," Lady Sara said, "but we might as well take a look at it."

She sent Rick to find as many witnesses as he could to the Friday night sword swinging. He was to join us at the pub on the corner of Fulham Road and Sewell Walk after it opened. Lady Sara and I called on the actor.

Quinn had rooms in Priory Walk. He was in. He was a handsome, middle-aged man with a diminutive mustache, and he gave the impression of modest affluence—meaning he hadn't been out of work long. He was delighted to have visitors. He began acting immediately, playing the royal host, and Lady Sara's question about the young writer completely disrupted his performance.

"No idea who he is or where he lives," he said. "Met him at Kyushu Fujimura's place—Kyushu's a painter." He added, quite unnecessarily, "Japanese fellow. He might know. I can give you his address."

The painter was out. Directed by his landlady, we found him down by the Thames, painting. He did know the young writer's name—Raul Mowling—and his address in Fulham Road.

Mowling lived above a greengrocer. He was a Bohemian beginner—he had cut adrift from his former life to become a novelist or a poet or whatever, and it was only too obvious that he was counting his pennies and wondering how long it would be before he started earning something. His room was furnished with packing cases—

even his bed consisted of three packing cases set end to end—and except for books obviously purchased second- or fourth- or eighth-hand, there was little else to be seen.

Our interest in the sword was quickly described. Someone had swung it in Sewell Walk on Friday night, and we wanted to see it.

"That was me swinging it," Mowling said. "I carried it for Ben. It looked atrociously heavy, but it wasn't."

Why swing it? He shrugged. When one had a sword in one's hands, there was a great temptation to swing it, especially after an exhilarating evening. Did he know where Ben lived? Oddly enough, he did. He was a stranger here himself, so he had the people he met write down their addresses for him.

A short time later we interrupted Ben at his work. He had a commission to do a mural—actually, a large painting—for an art-loving innkeeper somewhere in the country whose establishment was called St. George and the Dragon. The painting was to be large enough to cover an upper wall of the inn's public room, and it would depict the climactic moment of St. George's epic battle with the dragon. Ben had a model—a tall, gawky youth—posed in medieval armor. Like the sword, the armor was probably a stage prop. The model stood poised with sword uplifted, ready to deliver a deadly *coup de grâce* to the dragon, which as yet existed only as a sketch on the long canvas.

Our visit was brief. With the artist's wife Doll hovering anxiously in the background, Lady Sara exam-



ined the sword. I swung it once myself—carefully, since I was indoors—and we thanked Ben for his courtesy and left.

“What next?” I asked.

“The printshop,” Lady Sara said.

By that time it was after one o’clock, and the public house on the corner of Sewell Walk and Fulham was open. Rick was waiting for us.

“My agents have found seven more people who witnessed the sword swinging,” he said. “Three saw it in Sewell Walk and four in Fulham Road.”

“That’s what I needed to know,” Lady Sara said. “It was done in poorly lighted streets just after midnight, but in Chelsea that constitutes a public event. At least half of Chelsea’s population is still awake and active at that time. Probably everyone in Chelsea knew about the sword swinging by Saturday noon.”

While we sipped our ale, Lady Sara slipped easily into conversation with the landlord. “I noticed you have a printer next door,” she remarked. “There don’t seem to be many of them around.”

“Old Jim has been here for years,” the landlord said. “Could have retired long ago, but he loves his work. Does excellent work, too. None better.”

“I suppose over the years he has had a lot of apprentices,” Lady Sara said.

“More than I could count,” the landlord said. “Some good, some bad. Some spent time and money here when they should have been working. Some I never saw.”

“There’s a job printer in Cheapside. I was wondering whether he

could be one of Old Jim’s apprentices.”

“Could be his nephew,” the landlord said. “George—I don’t remember his last name. He settled over that way when he got his master’s papers.”

“Did he get on well with his uncle?”

“Like a son to him. Comes to visit all the time. Was here just this past week—Friday night it was—and the two of them came in for their ale and talked until closing.”

We finished our own ale and left. “We have our case,” Lady Sara announced.

I said doubtfully, “Why Constable Cahill, why did he have to die, and why Chelsea?”

“All of that. The question is, what’s to be done about it? Because we don’t have a scrap of evidence.” She thought for a moment. “The murder of a police constable is considered a serious matter on every level, and a judge should be lenient with his warrants. But we need at least one witness who is willing to commit perjury. Say a vagrant who awakened shortly after two in the morning in a convenient doorway and saw where Constable Cahill went. Could you find one for me?”

“I’ll find you a dozen,” Rick promised.

“One will suffice. If it turns out that I’m wrong, the vagrant can decide maybe he had a nightmare. Vagrants aren’t considered very reliable witnesses anyway, so no one will think too much of it. Join Charles in Cheapside, and the two of you look for the most convincing lying witness you can find. Bring





him to Connaught Mews. Colin and I will return there now and get hold of Chief Inspector Mewer. This will require some planning."

It required a ridiculous amount of planning before we arrived at the Cheapside printshop in a roundabout way at two o'clock Monday morning. The drapes in the window and door of the rear shop were tightly drawn. Chief Inspector Mewer's men had already taken up positions surrounding the building. The chief inspector himself kicked in the door to the Cow Lane storage room, and he and a picked squad of his men rushed inside—to catch a gang of counterfeiters in the act. They frantically tried to conceal the press in its hiding place under the floor, but sheets of counterfeit notes had been hung up to dry, and there were stacks of trimmed ten pound notes in several locations. There was, in fact, so much evidence scattered about that the counterfeiters would have needed half an hour's notice to dispose of it all.

They put up a fight regardless. There were five of them, all large and muscular, and the police almost had more than they could handle. The ensuing battle wrecked the table and smashed boxes of paper stock on all sides before the counterfeiters were subdued.

Lady Sara and I watched from the doorway. When it was finally over, she observed, "Constable Cahill—one man against that crew—never had a chance. Shall we go home?"

Later—it was all of five A.M.—the same distinguished visitors

who had called Sunday morning waited on Lady Sara. This time they wanted to know how she had done it. The case was clinched by then. Constable Cahill's body had been found buried in the cellar under the shop on Cheapside. As Lady Sara had predicted, it would be an important witness against the murderers.

"From the beginning it was obvious that only Constable Cahill's discovery of a crime of considerable importance could have justified his murder and beheading," she said. "Discovery had to mean disaster to a promising venture and grave consequences to those taking part. Cheapside has few shops in which an ordinary burglary would meet those qualifications, but the printshop interested me. The crime of counterfeiting satisfied all of the requirements, and the fact that the printer's storage room was equipped with heavy drapes and a door shade intrigued me. I wondered what happened there that required such lavish means of concealment."

"The Bank of England bloke said their queer was the best he'd seen in the past forty years," Chief Inspector Mewer remarked.

"The counterfeiters knew how good it was. They were energetically printing notes as fast as they could and knew they were on the threshold of considerable wealth. Another week and their agents would have been passing the notes all over the country—and England might have faced economic disaster. That was the situation Consta-



ble Cahill walked into. What actually happened is clear enough. The counterfeiter was careless with the drapes or the door shade. Cahill, glancing down Cow Street, noticed a gleam of light where none should have been. He walked in that direction, looked through the gap in the drapes, and to his amazement saw a major counterfeiting operation taking place right before his eyes. It probably took him some time to collect his thoughts and try to decide what to do."

"If he tried to collar that mob on his own, he didn't last long," the chief inspector growled. He was wearing a battered face himself, a souvenir of the fracas in the shop.

"Give him credit for knowing better than that. He was probably trying to decide whether to blow his whistle for help—and give the culprits time to dispose of evidence and use whatever means of escape were available to them—or go for help, knowing that they and the evidence could have disappeared by the time he returned. But the gang had a lookout posted or noticed him from inside the shop. Members came up behind him, rushed him inside, and finished him off in short order.

"Then they sat down to consider their predicament. They knew headquarters would soon know the approximate place the constable had reached on his beat before he disappeared. They didn't want police continuously snooping in their neighborhood looking for clues, so they decided to transfer that atten-

tion to some remote location. George Mellor had been visiting his uncle in Chelsea on Friday night, and he'd seen the artists and writer in Sewell Walk with an enormous sword. Certainly others had seen them also. So Mellor had the brilliant idea of cutting off Cahill's head and leaving it at Fulham Road and Sewell Walk, an intersection any number of witnesses would be able to tell the police the sword swingers had passed on their way home. The police were bound to wonder what the connection was between the severed head and the sword, and they would waste considerable time trying to trace sword and swinger. Their attention might be permanently diverted from Cheapside.

"It might have worked, after a fashion, if Mellor hadn't forgotten one critically important fact. His uncle, also a printer, was located near the Chelsea intersection. In the end Mellor's diversion pointed directly back at Cheapside—and himself."

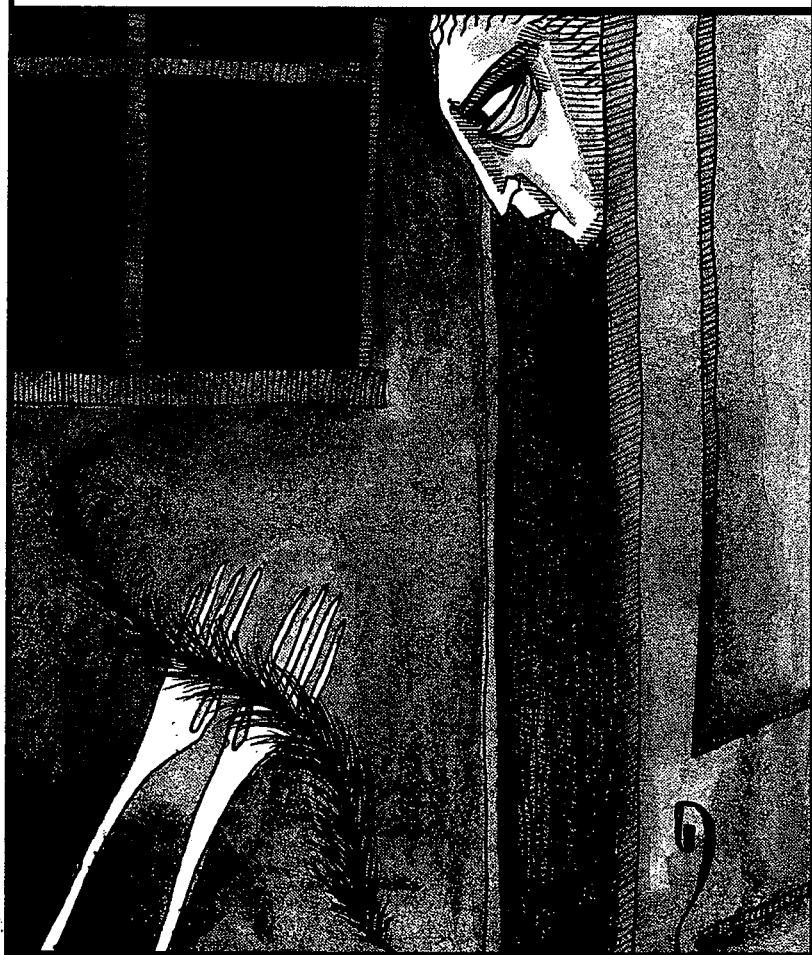
"Bunch of no-account scoundrels," Chief Inspector Mewer growled.

"I don't agree," Lady Sara said. "They were a decided cut above run-of-the-mill criminals. They were clever enough to recognize their predicament and creative enough to find an original way out of it. In doing so, they provided us with several hours of diversion on an otherwise uneventful Sunday. I feel I owe them something—I might even go to see them hanged. Now let's consider what can be done for Constable Cahill's widow and children."

FICTION

# THE CLAN

Sherry Decker



*Illustration by Rachel Stuart*

21

*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 11/99*

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**I**t was about this same time last year that Mrs. Flint moved into the house across the street. Mrs. Flint wasn't a person to encourage conversation, and based on her appearance, some of the neighbors jokingly suggested she was a witch. I knew right away she was a vampire but kept it to myself, out of professional courtesy.

Nobody really believes in witches any more, which benefits me, naturally. Later this evening children dressed up as witches will knock on my door, hold out a decorated sack or a plastic pumpkin, and shout, "Trick-or-treat." I'll smile, compliment their costumes, and drop in Snickers or Hershey bars—plain storebought treats, nothing *home-brewed*. Then I'll remind them to be careful crossing the street. My name is Amarantha Endless, by the way. I'm second in line as Matriarch of our Clan—such as the Clan is these days.

The day after Mrs. Flint moved in we had a thunderstorm. It didn't feel normal, that storm. It felt like the beginning of something bad, as if the sky were alive but sick. Litter whirled up and down the street, and not far away huge green-black clouds with fearsome yellow edges rolled closer.

The clouds resembled boiling mud, a pestilence or an approaching plague. I felt the thunder's concussion in my chest as if my heart stopped for a second—an odd, mortal feeling.

By two A.M. the storm had passed. I rolled over and went back to sleep with Phoebe curled up against the backs of my knees. Even though

I've cut back on her food, Phoebe is still quite a tank of a cat at fourteen pounds.

The next morning as I worked my way around to the front of the house dragging a trashbag and picking up storm litter, I heard the sound of a squawking, exotic bird from across the street. I recognized the sound as that of a cockatoo. It said, "Give me a taste," and "I'm so hungry," and "C'mere, sweet thing."

I prefer cats. Phoebe isn't much of a hunter, but she seems to enjoy following me around outside. Usually she's content to lie in the shade of the clematis, mashing down my hosta plants, and blinking at the sunlight. It takes something phenomenal for her to exert herself physically, either a monstrous storm—or an escaped cockatoo.

Right behind me I heard a sudden squawk and then a growl. There was Phoebe with her fluffy tank's butt in the air, her tail straight up.

"Phoebe?" I said. "What are you doing?" She shook her head back and forth and then ran behind the garage carrying something in her mouth and scattering white feathers.

I gathered up the feathers and put them in my pocket. The next morning there were handwritten flyers on utility poles and fences:

LOST  
WHITE COCKATOO—"GEORGE"  
REWARD  
CALL 555-1313

At first I planned to keep mum, but then I pictured how I'd feel if Phoebe were missing. I'd rather



know she was dead than keep hoping she'd come back. So I crossed the street just after sunset and knocked on Mrs. Flint's front door for the very first time.

From inside the house came the sound of footsteps, hard-soled shoes on a hardwood floor as if Mrs. Flint were climbing stairs. She must've been in the basement. I straightened up, took a deep breath, and prepared myself for delivering bad news.

The door opened the length of a safety chain. Half a gaunt face with one shadowed eye appeared in the glow of a twenty-five watt porch-light. An ancient yet familiar smell rolled from the open door, the odor of dust and dirt and mold and damp, and something else, something vile and truly rotten, something I hadn't smelled in a dozen decades. I'd forgotten how bad vampires smell.

"Mrs. Flint," I said, "I'm your neighbor from across the street." I turned around far enough to point to my own house.

Her voice held a note of impatience. "Yes?"

"I saw your notice . . . about George."

The chain rattled, and the door swung open wide. I took a step back, realizing that when she had first opened the door Mrs. Flint must have been crouching down. She stood straight now and was over six feet tall. I guessed her age to be anywhere from forty to sixty—she had that mature, drawn look around the eyes and mouth, and yet there were no wrinkles. Her skin was the color and texture of mozzarella cheese, her hair that of

dull steel wool. I suspected it was a cheap wig pulled into a frizzy wad at her neck. Not a good color for her with that morbid complexion. She wore a black dress that draped like an old musty curtain on her gaunt frame. The dress hung clear to her lower calves, and below that she wore heavy black stockings and those horrible black oxfords; you know, the orthopedic kind that little old ladies wear for support.

"Where is George?" Mrs. Flint gripped the edge of the door. Her hand looked powerful. She had broad, short nails, neatly manicured.

"I'm so sorry. George flew into my back yard, and Phoebe, my cat, caught him. She killed him before I could stop her. I thought you'd want to know."

"I see," Mrs. Flint said. "And what did you do with George's body?"

Her coolness surprised me, and my mouth almost fell open but I caught it. "Body? There was no body. By the time I caught up with Phoebe there was nothing left but feathers."

"I see," she repeated. "May I have his feathers?" She eyed my pocket as if she knew I was fingering them at that very second, which I was. Her expression revealed no recognition of *my* station in life. Vampires are so self-important and arrogant they rarely acknowledge me, even if they do notice.

Gathering most of the feathers, I handed them over, touching her open palm for only an instant yet long enough to feel her cold flesh, as cold as if she'd been handling ice. Repulsed, I yanked my hand away.

She caught my reaction, and for a half second she smiled—a mere twitch at the corner of her colorless mouth. She stroked the feathers with her thumb, back and forth in her palm, and then her cold gaze fastened on me.

“So, you have a *cat*,” she said. An accusation.

I nodded. “Phoebe. A plump, six-year-old calico.”

“Well, cats will be cats, won’t they?” She stepped back, and the door eased forward on its own.

“I’m really sorry,” I said, leaning to the left to keep eye contact. “Phoebe has never done anything like this before.”

“It’s natural for predators to hunt,” Mrs. Flint said, and then the door closed with a resounding *clank*. The chain rattled, and her footsteps sounded on the hardwood floor.

Later Phoebe and I ventured into the front yard again. I snipped a few late-blooming foxgloves, snapdragons, and calendulas and then stood wiping stains from my shears with the thumb of my glove.

“That should do nicely,” I said. “What do you think, Phoebe?” I expected to see her rolling on the brick path where she’d been a moment before, but she was gone. I glanced around. “Phoebe?” I leaned over the front gate and checked up and down the street and then hurried into the back yard. My fence is six feet tall, too high for a waddling fat cat like Phoebe to scale. She had simply vanished.

I put on my jacket and went looking and calling, canvassing the neighborhood for three blocks in every direction, peeking into open

garages and sheds and beneath porches. It was pitch dark when I returned home.

Phoebe has been my loyal companion ever since my last husband, Frank, passed away, so I went to bed feeling very alone. I tossed and turned all night. At dawn I threw on my robe and slippers, ran downstairs, and opened the back door. Phoebe lay on the porch, her mouth wide open. Her ribs heaved and shuddered, more of a spasm than breathing.

“Oh, Phoebe.” I knelt beside her. On the porch nearby was a white feather and a slimy pile of what appeared to be bloody, regurgitated meat. I picked her up, took her inside, and wrapped her in a big towel. Then I laid her on the heater vent in the kitchen and, rather than taking chances with conjuring or trying to doctor her myself, I called the twenty-four-hour vet.

I met Dr. Robins at his clinic and produced a zippered plastic bag containing the regurgitated meat from the back porch. Late that afternoon Dr. Robins called me at home. “At first I suspected slug bait,” he said. “But it turned out to be Tylenol tablets ground up and mixed with raw liver.”

“I can’t imagine . . .”

“Somebody fed it to her on purpose, but we caught it in time. You can come get her now.”

On the way to the clinic I experienced immense relief, then suspicion, and finally anger. When Phoebe was home once again, I marched across the street.

The setting sun threw my shad-

ow ahead of me as I shoved open Mrs. Flint's gate and climbed her steps. I banged on her door. A violet dusk fell as I raised my fist and banged again, and then came the familiar footsteps. The door groaned open. Mrs. Flint wore the same black musty clothes; her face wore the same lifeless, mozzarella cheese expression. The same sour, musty odor of decay wafted out the door.

I cleared my throat. "Mrs. Flint? Phoebe was poisoned and . . ."

"Your cat . . . the fat, six-year-old calico?"

"Yes, well, she's *plump*."

"We can't keep our pets forever, you know—look what happened to George." Mrs. Flint stepped back, and the door clanged shut in my face.

I waited for the sound of her shoes on the hardwood floor, but there was only silence. Gooseflesh crawled over me as I pictured her ecru-colored ear pressed against the door on the inside, pictured her listening for the sound of *my* footsteps, pictured her smiling—*felt* her smiling—and by the time I reached home, my anger had turned to rage.

I pride myself in not getting embroiled in silly feuds. There are childish, petty feuds going on amongst Clan members, too, and I have no desire to get involved so I seldom contact any of them. Another reason to avoid them is that some of the Clan seem to go out of their way to appear embarrassingly odd. For instance, my twin cousins Rudy and Raffael insist on dressing as mimes—downright *freakish*—but that's just my opinion.

Mrs. Flint foolishly encouraged

the rumor that she was a witch when the whole point is to blend in, to look as every bit human as your neighbor. I've lived all over the world—sometimes in places that no longer exist, such as Mesopotamia, Atlantis, Pompeii. No one suspected I was a witch. Even now I appear to be an ordinary, middle-aged widow, five foot four with permed, graying hair and silver wire-rimmed glasses. None of my nineteen husbands ever suspected, although a few of them mentioned that I never seemed to age, which is nearly true.

I've *been* a femme fatale—spent my second and third centuries that way—but it isn't worth the effort. Plus, it draws attention, and that's not advisable. After all, the Clan isn't *immortal*—we just tend to live a very long time. You'd think Mrs. Flint would have learned caution by now, too.

On Halloween morning I journeyed out before it was truly daylight and strolled half a block to the alley behind Mrs. Flint's. Litter from the storm remained wedged in cracks and crevices and stuck in tall dead grass. I followed a dog trail that looped through her yard to the porch.

So close to dawn Mrs. Flint was most likely in the basement. They tend to favor cellars and crawl spaces, you know. Her cellar had one small ground-level window with a heavy black cloth across it, blocking out daylight.

Brazenly, I tried her doors, first the back and then the front. Locked tight. At that early hour the neighbors are getting ready for work and

trying to get their kids dressed and off to school, so even if they spot you snooping they're too busy to care. From my pocket I withdrew one of George's remaining feathers and a bottle containing a mixture of black ink, garlic oil, powdered monkshood, a dove's tear, and one *secret* ingredient—I never reveal my potions entirely, you understand.

After shaking the mixture, I dipped the feather into the bottle and then drew a black cross on her back door, another on the porch, and a third on the bottom step. With the remaining mixture I circled her house, depositing a single drop every foot or so around the entire foundation. After smashing the bottle on her front walk, I kicked the shards of glass into her lawn, smiling at the inevitable results of the potion. Vampires *hate* garlic, monkshood, and dove's tears, but they're *allergic* to the secret ingredient. They break out in a rash.

The rest of that day I spent cleaning house, with Phoebe sniffing and inspecting my every effort. It turned out to be a beautiful day, actually warm for the end of October. My kitchen is on the sunny west side, so I propped the back door open but left the screen door locked.

Every Halloween I decorate my front porch with cornstalks, pumpkins, and "spider webs" woven of silver-flecked yarn. Busy with this project, I forgot to keep an eye on Mrs. Flint's house for *signs of life*, which is sort of a joke.

The sun had gone down by the time I finished decorating. The trick-or-treaters show up soon after dark, so I hurried to fill my punch-

bowl with candy and place it by the front door. As soon as I entered the kitchen, I smelled something bad, something rotten. And then I saw Phoebe sitting *outside* the screen door, blinking at me as calmly as you please.

"Phoebe, how did you get out?" I opened the screen door and with one hand nudged her fluffy butt across the threshold. "Come inside." Then *she bit me*—not a deep bite that drew blood, I was too quick for that, but her fangs did leave red tracks across my wrist.

"Phoebe!"

She was out the door and over the fence in two seconds. The screen door thumped shut.

"Well, for Pete's sake." Turning around, I discovered the real Phoebe licking her empty dish and realized that the first cat, the biting cat, had been an impostor. I spent the next five minutes conjuring and hexing to insure that my wrist healed without the usual vexing complications of a vampire bite.

Obviously Mrs. Flint hadn't yet figured out exactly whom she was dealing with. The dove's tear concoction had been fair warning, but apparently she had taken it for a challenge. So be it, I decided.

Vampires aren't limited to transforming themselves into bats, wolves, and smoke the way they're portrayed in films. It is true, however, that vampires may not enter your home without first being invited—so I'll admit my mistake there. She'd taken me by surprise. "Touché," I whispered.

Halloween night was clear with a scatter of stars and one gauzy



cloud that trailed a hunter's moon across the black sky. At nine P.M. I turned off all my lights. By then the cute little kids have stopped trick-or-treating, and it's all the big, pimply-faced high school kids, mostly boys, with their big clumsy feet that for some reason cannot seem to stay on the path. Besides that, they don't even bother with costumes and sometimes say rude things about the quality of the treats I hand out. Oh, if they only knew what I *could* give them!

For the first time in over two hundred years I felt an elation, an exhilaration, an evil enthusiasm if you will. Vampires are dangerous creatures, but the Clan has been around since God created earth; at least Granny was. Granny grew weary about seventy years ago and shut herself down, and Mother has been the Matriarch ever since. I guess Mother does an okay job of it—far be it for *me* to say things should be run differently.

The next morning Mrs. Flint's yard was gone—an entire foot of topsoil, grass, weeds, and old rosebushes. A raw crater surrounded her house, and I chuckled, picturing how she'd spent her evening at the tiresome end of a shovel, digging-itching-scratching-digging, probably in her prime hunting time, all because of my secret formula. That enticed me to dig even deeper into my long-neglected cache of potions.

Three blocks away on a street lined with maple trees is a Protestant church. It's six blocks to the Catholic church, and the little wafers the Protestants use for com-

munion are every bit as powerful as holy water, so why walk the extra three blocks? It was time, anyway. I try to attend church at least once a century.

When the communion tray was passed around, I “accidentally” spilled the tray on the floor. Whispering apologies, I got down on my hands and knees, scooped up the wafers, and dumped them in my purse. Deacons came rushing and tried to help me back into the pew, insisting that I not worry about the spill. Feigning dizziness, I headed for the ladies' room. Soon afterwards I departed with the stolen wafers. It was a shameful deed, yes, but necessary.

It's common knowledge that the hour right after sundown is the best time to launch an assault on a vampire. Upon rising, vampires go straight out to hunt, having a driving hunger for human blood. And that old myth about their needing to rest on their native soil in their own coffin is just plain silly. They don't require anything special. Vampires don't really sleep, either—they're just hiding because they're more vulnerable during daylight hours.

I returned to a cracked window near the back of Mrs. Flint's house. I pried up the screen, knocked out a loose wedge of glass, eased a hand through, unlocked the window, and climbed in. Her dining room was empty. The wallpaper was that old flocked stuff, aged to an unhealthy urine color with rusty stains below the window and on the ceiling around a tarnished chandelier. The place smelled worse than any out-

house I've ever interviewed, and remember, I've been around a long time.

There was a small lamp glowing against the front window shade—a pitiful attempt to civilize the appearance of her house from the street. At the rear of that room was a door, slightly ajar.

I pulled it open and stood at the top of skeletal stairs that descended into a black cellar. The light switch clicked up and down uselessly, so I adjusted my eyes for night vision and descended.

The smell almost took my breath away. The only worse smell in my memory was after a flood had ravaged a graveyard, dispersing hundreds of bloated corpses over field and town and eventually into the sewers. After the flood receded and the sun baked those contaminated streets, the smell of mortal decay was so foul it drove vultures away. Nevertheless, I continued down into that rancid cellar.

In my night vision everything glows green. Shadows are emerald-black. Anything alive or warm-blooded has an orange aura. Down there that night everything was green or black. Mrs. Flint's resting place was a filthy mattress in the northeast corner, in a paved crawl space, gloomy, cold, and moldy. The outline of the mattress shimmered a putrid chartreuse.

Crouching, I pulled the plastic bag of sacramental wafers from my pocket and inched forward until my toes touched the side of the mattress. I crumbled the wafers and sprinkled them across the foul bed. Then I continued to sprinkle the wa-

fers along the crawl space and on the cellar floor while backing out.

It was then I saw human bodies heaped in the farthest corner. They were all a decaying bluish-green, but none had yet deteriorated to bone. They explained the horrendous smell, however.

Back upstairs I left the cellar door ajar, climbed out through the same window, and hurried home.

Knowing that Mrs. Flint had already gained admittance to my house disguised as Phoebe, I kept checking Phoebe's aura. A vampire emits a dull green glow even when masquerading as a cat. Thankfully, Phoebe glowed like a lighted pumpkin.

I reinforced my house against vampire invasion, stringing garlic around each window, placing dried monkshood beside both front and back doors, and hanging a gilded cross on my entry wall.

Most vampires probably wouldn't enter a church, but a Master Vampire will walk down the corridors of the Vatican and gaze brazenly at the icons. He might even glare upward at the cross—with some visceral discomfort, of course. Vampires find the image of the cross offensive because it reminds them of their depravity and the impossibility of their salvation . . . well, nearly impossible, but I won't go into that. The point is, a vampire must *touch* a cross to be injured by it. Simply looking at the cross only causes them stomach pains.

Why is it that trouble arrives in doubles? It was nearly midnight. I had bathed, put on a clean nightgown, and had one foot raised to

climb into bed when the doorbell rang. Naturally, the first person I thought of was Mrs. Flint. I shoved my feet into slippers, grabbed my robe from the foot of the bed, and ran downstairs to the front door.

"Mother?"

"Hello, dear." Mother picked up her suitcase and hustled her way inside. "What's with all the garlic? I smelled it from the taxi!"

"Just a disagreement with the vampire across the street."

"Oh-h," she huffed, "I come all this way hoping for some peace and quiet and find myself in the middle of a war."

"Well, she started it."

"They always do, dear. It's their nature. Just ignore her."

"I tried that." I gave Mother the obligatory hug. "Good to see you. It's been a while."

"Not that long. Seventy years, maybe."

Mother set her suitcase at the bottom of the stairs and slipped out of her coat and gloves. I checked her aura. It was weak and flickering from weariness, more a peach color than true orange, but she passed the test. I hung her coat in the hall closet. "I could sure use a cup of herbal tea," she said with a sigh. "I'm pooped."

Not too pooped to talk until one A.M., though. Finally she installed herself in the guest room, and I staggered upstairs and fell into bed. At eight I was awakened by Phoebe squatting on my chest, sniffing my breath as if checking for life symptoms.

Mother was already up and in the living room with a fresh cup of

herb tea. She pointed out the window toward Mrs. Flint's house. "That's the place?"

I nodded.

"I couldn't help noticing her yard. Dove's tears and garlic?"

I nodded again.

"Why waste time with those old concoctions? Go for the jugular; *she* would."

"Thought I should give her a chance to back off first," I said.

"Courtesy doesn't pay. Not with vampires. They're ungrateful. If you died today, she'd spit on your grave tonight," Mother said.

Mother proceeded to interrogate me about the feud and how it had evolved into such an irksome situation. I felt like an apprentice again, taking a witchcraft test and being graded on procedure. After describing the situation from the beginning, I finished by adding, "Don't tell me you wouldn't have done something, too."

"Naturally, but if I had, her ashes would be scattered in hell by now."

Mother thinks malls are one of this century's greatest inventions, so she went shopping while I scurried to the health food store. Mother is very fussy about what she eats, and the Nutritious Pantry is the only place locally that carries some of that archaic stuff—rare, delicate herbs and things.

"Oh please, Amarantha," she said later. "Allow me to cook dinner. It's the least I can do."

Eating Mother's cooking for the first time in over half a century was a shock to my system. I ended up with indigestion, but thanks to a

brew that only Mother can make correctly, I felt better by bedtime. It's sort of like being bitten by a cobra who then turns around and injects you with its own antivenin.

Thoughts of Mrs. Flint had faded, and I was prepared to let bygones be bygones when Mother woke me up at six the next morning, blathering something about "bodies on the front porch." Sure enough, Mrs. Flint's basement victims were piled outside my front door in all their gruesome, decaying glory. I stepped outside at the same moment a police car pulled up to the curb.

Oh, I know what you're thinking—but the victims will *not* turn into vampires. That's just another part of the myth. There is quite a long and disgusting ceremony involved in a Master Vampire's creating a new creature. I won't go into details, since it's a repulsive transaction involving lots of screaming and thrashing and of course plenty of blood, so it seldom happens in populated areas.

"I'm Detective Zimmer from Homicide." A big, robust, blond guy, probably in his late thirties or early forties, jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "This is my partner, Officer Snow." Following him up my steps was a young policewoman. She was about twenty-five, brunette, and had a butt the size of an apple. "What can you tell me about this?" Detective Zimmer pointed toward the pile of bodies.

I covered my heart with one hand. "We just discovered them ourselves."

"We?"

I started to explain how Mother had found them, but then I saw that Mother had changed her appearance as she often does when she finds herself beside an attractive man. I assume she found Detective Zimmer attractive because now I had *two* apple butts on my front porch.

"Uh, my *niece* discovered them only moments ago and came to wake me," I explained.

Zimmer frowned at his partner. "Call for the meat truck and then get a tarp and cover the bodies." Officer Snow jogged back toward the patrol car.

"Who notified you?" I asked.

"An anonymous caller."

"Hmm." My eyes shifted toward Mrs. Flint's house.

Zimmer stepped inside, sniffing and frowning at the strings of garlic and the dried monkshood.

"Excuse the mess. We haven't finished putting away all the Halloween decorations," Mother said. She put her hand on his arm. "Would you care for some herb tea, Detective Zimmer?" she asked. "An almond croissant?"

"No, thank you, Miss . . ."

"Terry Endless," Mother said. "And this is my aunt, Amarantha Endless."

I felt the familiar burn of indigestion as we returned to the living room, Mother positioning Zimmer beside her on the sofa.

"How terrible," Mother said in her most helpless voice. "To think someone came right up on our porch with those poor dead people."

Zimmer explained that our porch had probably been chosen at ran-

dom for the dumping of murder victims. Then he described how several such “dumpings” had occurred in the past month.

“How awful,” Mother gasped.

Zimmer flipped his notebook shut and stood up. Mother made sure he had our phone number in case there were “any more questions” and accompanied him to the front door. When she returned, she was again her regular self—sixtyish, coiffed, manicured, all *crispy-looking*.

“What a sour expression you’re wearing, Amarantha,” she said.

“I’m losing my patience, Mother.”

“With me?” She looked shocked.

“No, with Mrs. Flint.”

“Oh well . . . yes! Of course.”

That night Mother accompanied me across the street. Surprisingly, Mrs. Flint had upgraded her resting place to a second story bedroom and had acquired a genuine bed—a baroque, black-enameled, gargoyle-carved monstrosity with a black velvet canopy and black velvet coverlet and black velvet curtains over the window. A deep burgundy Persian carpet with an amber fringe covered most of the floor.

We poured a mixture of olive oil, snips of virgin lamb’s wool, powdered snail slime, and one *secret* ingredient all over the bed, the carpet, and the drapes. Mother knelt at the threshold of the room and held a white candle’s burning wick to the edge of the carpet. A low blue flame raced forward and trailed off in every direction. Moments later it died down to a smolder, and we left, knowing that by midnight the contents of the room would be ash-

es without spreading to the house’s structure or even emitting enough smoke to be noticed by neighbors.

We also knew our actions would provoke a response, so we hurried home to prepare. I took a disgruntled Phoebe to the garage and locked her in my car with a blanket, a dish of water, and her litterbox. Mother helped store the garlic and the bouquets of dried monkshood in the attic—they were dropping seeds all over the foyer anyway.

It was late when our guest arrived, about three A.M. I was struggling to stay awake when smoke began seeping into the entry from beneath the front door. I glanced at Mother, relieved to see her alert. She had assumed the form of a mantel gargoyle, while I had transformed myself into a growling replica of Phoebe.

The invading smoke gathered into a swirling cloud at the foot of the stairs, finally taking on the shape of a tall, gaunt figure with a tidy auburn ponytail and black eyes with glowing red pupils. I thought the addition of a gold hoop earring an exotic touch.

“Mrs.” Flint had transformed herself into an impressive six foot four *male* vampire in an impeccably cut charcoal pinstriped suit and full cape. His emerald aura indicated he was “beyond the common”—we were dealing with a *Master Vampire*.

Flint narrowed his eyes and growled at me, “Thought you were dead, you mangy, recreant mooncalf.”

Recreant mooncalf? Do people still talk like that?



The kitchen radio was on low and the basement door open with the light burning below as a decoy. His footsteps were soft through the entry, and with long, sweeping strides he glided down the hall. The kitchen's tile floor clicked beneath his polished heels, the basement door squeaked, and the third step down gave its dependable telltale groan. I remember wondering how he had survived the centuries. This was embarrassingly easy.

Mother and I assumed human form again and followed, each of us armed with a wooden stake and large gold crosses on chains around our necks. After all, why not?

I reached the bottom of the stairs first, expecting to find him hovering over the two "sleeping forms" we'd constructed in cots in the farthest corner, but he was nowhere in sight. Then the door at the top of the stairs slammed shut and locked, and voices surrounded us—vile whispers and loathsome utterings. The room filled with dark, flickering shadows. The shadows came right through the concrete walls, and we were soon surrounded by creatures with red glowing eyes in otherwise featureless faces.

"Oh my," I heard Mother say under her breath. "Oh my oh my."

"Mr. Flint," I began. My voice sounded unusually high.

"The name is *Morgan Flint*." He slid from the shadows and stood a few feet away, bowing formally. "And you are both of the Endless Clan, I've recently learned."

"This really isn't necessary, Mr. Flint," I said. "All of this fuss over a silly cockatoo?"

There was an angry edge to his voice. "*More* than a cockatoo. George was my brother. And I might ask you the same: 'all this fuss' over a stupid cat? After all, the escalation of this situation has been *your* doing. You invaded my privacy and destroyed my property." Morgan Flint strolled behind us, his cape rustling. He paused there. "Why did you bring these?" With the toe of one shoe he nudged the tip of the stake in my hand, which I'd been trying to conceal in the folds of my skirt.

But without waiting for an answer, he circled us again, waving a manicured hand in the air. "I brought something for you, too." He produced a thick black candle from inside his cape and held it only inches from the tip of my nose, forcing me to look cross-eyed in order to see it. On its smooth, rounded side, halfway between top and bottom, was an eye. The eye opened, revealing an algae-green iris and a red pupil. Its lid was covered with serpent's scales. The eye blinked, narrowed, and focused on me.

"Here, take the candle," Morgan Flint suggested.

I shook my head.

"Oh my." Mother closed her eyes and started humming under her breath.

Once, in a cave on a Mediterranean island when I was barely a girl, I'd seen just such a candle. I recall how my teacher took my hand in hers, how she shook her head. "If offered, do not accept it," she said. "You will lose your powers and become its slave."

"Here, take the candle," Morgan

Flint insisted, but again I refused. He circled us a third time, even slower, making my skin crawl. Then he halted in front of us again, his ruinous smile sharp and deadly, his gums dark red.

Obviously I had underestimated him. If something happened to Mother, the Clan would blame me—if I survived. *Oh my*, I felt myself thinking as if Mother's thoughts were contagious. *Oh my oh my oh my*.

Mother hummed louder, and Flint's shadowy kinfolk suddenly began scurrying about the basement, darting first one way and then back again as if in a panic.

My toes and fingertips tingled, and I realized it was due to Mother's humming.

Upstairs rapid footsteps pounded through the house. The door at the top of the stairs was ripped from its hinges, and shadows began filing down the stairs and into my basement.

Morgan Flint's white hand trembled. He drew the candle close and pressed it against his sternum as if trying to hide behind it. He narrowed his red eyes, bared his fangs, and hissed.

The first to reach the bottom of the stairs were Rudy and Raffael, in full mime whiteface, striped satin coveralls, black shoes, gloves, and idiotic pink hats. By the sound of it the entire Clan was arriving.

Mother scolded, "Well, you took your sweet time!"

Morgan Flint fell back against the wall, and his shadow-kin crawled around his feet squealing like rats

trapped in a burning barn. I lunged and drove the sharpened point of my stake into the glaring eye of the candle. Black liquid spurted out and ran down Morgan Flint's sleeve, smoking and bubbling. I shoved harder, and the candle broke in half. The stake pierced the lapel of his pinstriped suit, his fine white Egyptian pinpoint shirt, and finally his dead black heart. With eyes full of fading surprise he slid down the wall to the floor. His flesh crumbled to dust, his suit and cape smoldered. Then he and his kindred burst into flames and vanished in a swirl of smoke, leaving nothing but a smear of soot on the concrete floor.

"Mother, I've never heard that melody you were humming."

"It's a special spell, reserved for the Matriarch alone."

"Hmm."

The Clan hung around for nearly a week, and we had a long overdue family reunion. Apparently most of the feuds were settled decades ago. We all got along pretty well—well, mostly, but I won't go into that. And as a result of all the festivities Phoebe's actually dropped a pound or two.

I've decided to "pop in" on Mother occasionally—about every decade or so—because I suspect she's keeping secrets. I've also dug out all my old potions, remedies, and even my old notes from the chests in the attic. Time to catch up on the ancient arts. Some of them are quite intriguing, you know, especially those love spells. It's been a long time.

FICTION

# THE SECRET OF LIFE

Jas. R. Petrin



Illustration by Donald David

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“D on’t trust anyone,” La-La Lloyd advises us, “that’s the secret of life. The minute you trust someone—that’s it! Finished!”

“What’s finished?” asks Yelp Lauder, with an innocence that surprises all of us. For if Yelp doesn’t know what’s finished, then nobody does.

But La-La answers him anyway. “You are,” he growls. “You’re finished. That’s the way the world works.”

We are sitting in the lounge at the Westbrook Hotel, which as everybody knows is Donny Rumano’s place. And La-La Lloyd, who is apparently here by some previous arrangement, as he keeps glancing up every time the door creaks open, has condescended to sit down at our table. It is no small thing to have La-La Lloyd sit down at your table, for La-La has become a very loud noise in the neighborhood and generally sits wherever he pleases, or doesn’t sit at all and stands around like a policeman.

“You heard about Tee-Ball Johnson?” La-La continues. Then he shakes his head. “No, you guys would not hear about him. Tee-Ball is a guy that I know when I am living in Windsor, near to the river, next to the tunnel coming up from Detroit. Tee-Ball doesn’t trust his own mum. He is a great success. Then one evening—it is just a few weeks ago, in fact—he pops out of a bar full of good cheer, or full of something, and thoughtlessly turns his back on a strip-mall Easter Bunny. Then suddenly, *pop-a-pop-pop*, he has got more holes in him than two yards of mosquito netting.”

“You mean the bunny pops him?” queries Billy Bunce, whose round glasses give him an air of ceaseless amazement.

“I guess it’s the bunny. Or one of his elves.”

“But the Easter Bunny doesn’t have any elves.”

“Then one of his chickens does it!” La-La snaps, highly irritated that Billy should challenge him thus on the subject of Easter Bunnies. La-La then gathers himself and continues with his previous dignity. “In any case, elves or chickens, it makes no never-mind to old Tee-Ball, who from that instant forward has no opinion on the subject. The point I am trying to make here is that this is what can happen when you forget about the Secret of Life.” At this moment someone bangs in through the street door so abruptly that La-La flinches and his hand leaps for his inside pocket. It never makes it to his inside pocket, for, as all can see, it is only Greensleeves McKeckney barging in out of the warm spring evening to rattle the cigarette machine. La-La glowers. He does not like Greensleeves. “You have to be on your guard,” La-La cautions, lowering his hand as a scorpion might lower its tail, “in case someone is up to no good.”

At this point I am beginning to notice something. When first we sit down, the establishment is practically empty, there being besides ourselves only a couple of queans pressing coins into the VLT machines, which the wags here also call sucker-punchers, or sometimes cheat-a-chumps. But the room has been filling up, with people entering in from

the lobby and quietly finding tables and chairs. As a rule this would make no impression on me; but today happens to be a Tuesday, and Tuesdays are generally so quiet in this place that I think Donny Romano would like to expunge them from the calendar.

As I say, I take notice of these individuals.

There is One Lung Kroeker, who is called that because he coughs as if he's trying to force his lungs to vacate his ribs. And there's No-Doze Coffee and Too-Kool DeVeaux. Also the aged Dino "the Dinosaur" Ackerman and his octogenarian nemesis Banjo-Eyes Bunce. And there is Henton and all of his crowd and of course Tommy Hightops, who is La-La's lieutenant. Also there are numerous others, all most hard-edged and inflexible individuals, every one of them. I have not seen such an inventory of loogans gathered under one ceiling fan in many moons. It is difficult to suppose that it could be a coincidence.

"So," I say conversationally to La-La, following his next glance at the door, "are you expecting to meet someone here tonight?"

He studies me flatly before answering, his eyes just as cool as two orbs of black ice, and I remember that he does not like to have his intentions guessed at. "The fact of the matter is," he says, "I *am* expecting to meet someone." He pauses as if to consult with himself whether or not mere mortals such as ourselves are deserving of the information, then adds grudgingly, "I suppose it's all right to tell you that I am here to resolve a mystery."

"A mystery?" Yelp Lauder's sunken face comes to life. He's a sucker for mysteries.

"Yes, a mystery. At least it's a mystery to me. You see, for some weeks now some monkey has been making threats against my person. In fact, this monkey has been threatening to smite me—"

"You mean . . ."

"You heard what I said! Threatening to cancel me, to erase me, to try and rub me out!"

This is indeed shocking news to all of us.

"Who is this individual?" demands Billy Bunce, his spectacles flashing with indignation as if La-La is a close and cherished buddy. "Who threatens you with such a thing?"

"That," says La-La, with a tone of voice so struck-through with consequence that it makes my skin tingle, "is what I intend to find out. I have my suspicions, and I mean to confirm them. You see—" he tilts his large padded shoulders at us "—this very morning I receive a message that if I appear here tonight I will learn who this monkey is. The message is signed 'From a friend,' so I have hopes that I may settle the matter once and for all."

This is such a serious announcement, we have to sit for a moment, mulling it over.

While we are mulling, La-La casts his mistrustful gaze about the



room. "There are certainly a lot of familiar faces here in this place. I never realize this is such a popular oasis. And on a Tuesday night, too. No wonder my place is as good as empty every Tuesday evening—all my patrons must be gathering here."

La-La is referring to his own establishment, which goes by the name of the Lalapaloosa Club. La-La has other interests also, such as the Ooh La-La Sports Bar, but the Lalapaloosa Club is his primary establishment, and it's where most of these individuals seek out their nightly libations and confabulations. I don't bother mentioning to La-La that this is a most unusual crowd for the Westbrook, as I don't want him to think I'm deliberately adding to his current burden of suspicions and worries. All the same I am uneasy. There seems to be no explanation for it.

For some reason La-La's attention again drifts back to his departed cohort Tee-Ball, remarking that old Tee-Ball, back in Windsor, would have enjoyed such a crush of patrons on a Tuesday night.

"Would he?" I'm glad to return to a subject so interesting. "Then your friend Tee-Ball, I take it, was a popular fellow?"

"He was a fellow extremely jolly with everybody and with everyone. A slapper of backs and a shaker of hands. A teller of jokes and amusing stories. He could have run for mayor if he had wished to, and taken over City Hall without much difficulty; but I am certain he didn't do so because there was no percentage in it. He had already taken it over, if you get my meaning."

"But then he runs into some heavy weather?"

"Yes, a most serious hailstorm, if I may use that expression."

"I suppose you were sorry to hear about it when this tragedy happens?"

La-La emits a short dry laugh.

"Sorry? No, I won't go that far. In fact, I won't hesitate to tell you that I didn't care for old Tee-Ball very much at all. In fact, to me old Tee-Ball was a great nuisance, forever shoving his long nose into my business. Not only his long nose but his big mitts, too, scooping up things that ought to have come in my direction. Am I sorry? No, I won't go that far."

"So who else, then, doesn't like him?"

"I don't know. I think I am the only one."

"You and the Easter Bunny."

"That's right."

"The Easter Bunny has got it in for him."

"That must be so."

"Or the Easter Bunny was paid for his efforts."

La-La takes a very long, hard look at me after this statement. His gaze is penetrating, and I think he can read my thoughts.

"As you know, such things can happen," he comments finally.

Along about this moment La-La stiffens somewhat, and I can immediately see why. A most remarkable thing appears to be happening. Every person in the room is rising, all of a body, and is converging silently

on our table. This time La-La's hand makes it all the way to his coat, and under it, and clenches something in an inside pocket. But before he can do more than this, quite remarkably, the mob surrounding us commences to sing . . .

*"Happy birthday to you!*

*Happy birthday . . ."*

And such like. The usual refrain. And upon reaching the penultimate line of this old cherry they burst forth vigorously with the key words . . .

*" . . . dear La-La-a-a-a!"*

. . . reaching a crescendo. Then:

*"Happy birthday to yo-o-o-ou!"*

It isn't a practiced effort, that's for certain, since most of these characters have very little choir experience. It's more of a multi-throated baying phenomenon, but they all seem to have thrown their hearts into it with great spirit, and as the reverberations die away in the corners, the overhead lights are dimmed by an unseen hand, the kitchen door opens, and a chef appears in the semidarkness, his tall hat a pillar of correctness in the glow of a cake that has so many candles burning on it it is a wonder that the sprinkler system does not erupt and drench us in streams of water. Everyone applauds mightily. There is a stamping of feet and a pounding of tables, and a cry of *Speech! Speech!* as a bewildered La-La rises to his feet.

"Well," he says when the tumult simmers down. "Well, well." And it seems he may go on with this syllable a few more times, having prepared no special words to address this throng, but at this moment the cake is set before him, and being a man accustomed to take his cues at short notice, he clears his throat and makes a soldierly thrust at it:

"I have to tell all of you that I'm surprised and delighted. You seem to have carefully planned and executed this effort. I don't know how the date of my birthday slips out, but I suspect the leak occurs very close to the main boiler."

At these words he gives Hightops the glassy eye, as Hightops—who is hovering about like a vulture—is La-La's most trusted lieutenant and the most likely agent to stir up this throng. Hightops looks sheepish, like some sort of bad boy, and grins back mischievously. And La-La grins also as if he will say no more about the matter.

"You have all shown me a great kindness by coming here," La-La continues, "and I want you to know that it is much appreciated. You are all true friends—" here I think La-La has perhaps stepped a little over the mark, as the loogans thronged about the room to honor him are not known for their friendliness even at the best of times, but La-La sets this right somewhat by adding "—and I hope that each and every one of you will get what is coming to you."

General, if somewhat nervous, laughter.

"Blow out the candles," someone hollers.

La-La stoops over the cake—then backs off a little, for the heat is enormous—gathers his breath, and blows the candles out. There is a round of applause.

“Anyway,” La-La sums up, homing in on the end of his oration, “please accept my sincere thanks and also a small token of my regard in that your drinks for the rest of the evening will be on me. Hightops will take care of it.”

There is practically a standing ovation at this announcement, a stirring attempt at “For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow,” and then everybody starts shouting orders at Shelly the barmaid.

It is now time for the cutting of the cake, which is as everybody knows a serious tradition, loaded with custom and procedure, and of course always performed by the celebrity himself. To aid in this effort, Mike the Musician brings forth a knife the size of something you might find in the Tower of London for the lopping off of heads and proffers it to La-La. La-La looks at it, then looks at the cake, and at this moment seems to make up his mind about something.

“You cut it,” he says.

Mike the Musician is more than willing. Perhaps he thinks this will put him in solid with La-La. He grips this machete in his fist as if he is about to slaughter a hog, then plunges it with great vigor into the top of the cake, dead center.

“Hold it right there,” La-La says.

Somewhat astonished, Mike does as instructed. Stands there, all eyes glued on him, with the knife buried in the cake.

“Don’t move,” La-La advises him. “In fact, you shouldn’t even breathe.”

We all wait, wondering at this development, our pulses racing, watching the cake, watching Mike the Musician’s expression of puzzlement, but most of all watching La-La Lloyd.

La-La is very cool. In fact, he is downright calm. He slowly gets to his feet and leans over the table, his face above the cake, scrutinizing it carefully from all angles. Then he looks at us.

“Who brought this cake?”

There’s a brief, guilt-filled silence. Then Joe the Usher, an exceptionally tough loogan who happens to be in the employ of the Lalapaloosa Club, whose job it is to usher people to their seats, and out of them, mostly the latter, steps forward and mutters hesitantly, “Uh—it was me who picked up the cake, boss.”

“Come here.”

Joe the Usher does so.

La-La says to him, “I want you to take a look at something. See this icing? See the way it appears as though it has been slightly disturbed here? And also in this other place, these small words written all around the bottom—they are hard to read and it looks as if the green of the icing doesn’t quite match.”

The Usher isn't sure what to make of this. But rightly or wrongly he perceives himself to be in bad favor. He suddenly begins trembling, and soon he is trembling so badly that he can hardly trust his legs to hold him upright. He knows a thing or two about La-La. Knows how aggravated his boss can become should he perceive that someone in his employ has bungled things. The Usher steadies himself by gripping the edge of the table, supporting his weight with his substantial arms. He studies the cake as he has been directed, first from one side and then from the other, and finally admits to La-La, as if baring his soul to him, "In this especial spot, as you say, the icing does look disturbed, boss. It looks as if it has been skoodged."

"Skoodged?" says La-La. "Is that what you think?" He re-examines that spot on the cake, frowns and nods. "I believe you are right. The question is, how did it get skoodged? And now please also take a look at the lettering. Can you read aloud to all of us what it says, please?"

I have been peering hard at the cake myself all this time, and only now am I able to make out that there is indeed some sort of minute inscription crafted in tiny green characters about the skirting of the cake—so tiny is this lettering that I first dismissed it as a decorative flourish. I cannot tell if the icing matches or not.

The Usher squinches up his eyes to inspect it even more closely. Then, when he is satisfied that he has deciphered it beyond all doubt, with exaggerated contortions of his lips he reads the sentiment aloud to all of us.

It begins with a very familiar tone.

"Happy birthday to you . . . Happy birthday to you . . ." Then, "'Here's a greeting from—'" he hesitates "'—from old Tee-Ball.'" A nervous glance at La-La before finishing. "'And here's a gift from him too.'"

"Hmm," says La-La, "a gift. Isn't that strange? Am I not right in assuming that this cake is a gift from all of you people?"

"That's right," replies Hightops, edging forward. He is a little man built like a bull terrier, dressed as always in a fancy jogging suit and bright white running shoes. "I took up a collection."

"Then I wonder what these words could possibly mean."

"I dunno, boss."

The Usher appeals to La-La with a taut, tense urgency. "I only picked up the cake from the bakeshop, boss. Got it when I heard it was ready. I didn't order it. I didn't have it decorated. I swear I didn't have nothing to do with this!"

"I was the one who ordered the cake," says Hightops. "I don't know how the icing got skoodged. And there was nothing in the decorating instructions, of course, about making any mention of Tee-Ball."

"Interesting, interesting." La-La Lloyd arches his wiry eyebrows. "Well, you know, a little skoodging of the icing I do not mind so much. But this stretch of poetry is quite another thing. And taking the two

items together leads me to one conclusion—I do believe that this cake has been tampered with.”

There is a silence.

“What do you mean ‘tampered with?’” Hightops asks.

“I believe that somebody—someone connected with Tee-Ball, obviously—has been tampering with my birthday cake.”

They say that two minds are better than one, so I suppose that a hundred is an even greater improvement, and when La-La poses this conundrum, all eyes turn toward the kitchen. It clicks with me, as it does with all of us, that tonight’s chef is not our usual chef, by whom I mean Boy Michael, a great favorite of us all, but some other individual whom we have never seen before.

This time Hightops whispers. “Do you think it’s been poisoned?”

“No,” La-La replies calmly, “I am not saying that. Poison was never Tee-Ball’s way. Both Tee-Ball and his associates favored quick results. And knowing them as I do, and guessing that this effort has most likely come from that direction, I conclude that there’s a very good chance that this cake could—you know—” He raises both hands, fingers splayed wide, in front of him. “Explode.”

There is a gasp. Mike the Musician’s face turns gray, a sick gray, a cold, greasy gray, the color of gray you will sometimes see in a slice of ham that has been forgotten at the back of the meat keeper in your fridge. He looks down at the knife gripped tightly in his hand, he looks at the blade of it thrust into the cake. He is so overwhelmed by the ramifications of this connection between himself and the cake that he takes on the appearance and rigidity of a block of stonework in the police station courtyard.

“Omigod!” he manages. “Oh jeez!”

And the rest of us buzz and rustle nervously.

“Do not panic,” La-La tells all of us, a very model of self-composure. “We will deal with this, if we can. What we must do,” he says in reassuring tones, “is dispose of the problem in an expeditious and innocuous manner. If successful we will sleep in our own beds tonight, or the beds that we normally sleep in. If we are not successful, then . . .”

He gives a gentle lift of his shoulders, makes a soft popping noise with his tongue, and one of the queans holding onto the bar lets out a sort of a moan and jerks her nyloned knees tight together.

I think at this point there should be a drum roll. With both hands, and intense concentration, La-La takes the rim of the platter in his strong fingers. A nod to Mike the Musician signals that this worthy has leave to cautiously release his grip on the knife handle, and he does release it, most cautiously and gingerly. Then, gathering himself like a cobra, La-La suddenly straightens and hurls the cake high above our heads. It passes through the air in a graceful arc, causing all of us to dive at the floor clapping our hands protectively over our heads.



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La-La's aim is true. The cake neatly disappears through the kitchen pass-through opening. But the sound we are dreading does not come. What we do hear is something different. A muffled *splat!* as the cake strikes a tiled wall and a mushy *plop!* as it falls to the floor.

None of us speaks. None of us dares to breathe. Then, with a grin of embarrassment, Hightops gets up off the floor, brushes his track suit off, and says, "Well, so much for—"

At this moment there is a sharp whinny from the kitchen. A shout of "Yuck!" or "Muck!" or some word very much like that, and in the next instant the alien chef appears in the pass-through with both hands and one knee on the countertop as if he intends to launch himself at us in a rage from the opening.

**BOOM!**

My place in the corner provides me with an exquisite view. The chef is wonderfully frozen in time for a second as if caught in the flash of a strobe light, then is propelled from the pass-through opening like a well-aimed cannonball trailing smoke. His hurtling body reaches the door, which at precisely that moment is thrown open by an unsuspecting Greensleeves, who is reentering the room. The chef strikes him like a torpedo, his momentum carrying both men out into the street. At the same instant the shock wave has other effects. It knocks Hightops sprawling on his backside. It sends dust down upon us from the ceiling tiles. Many of the women and not so few of the men squeal horribly, thinking they have been blown to bits, or even maimed. But in a few seconds it is plainly evident that the force of the blast has been confined to the kitchen, from which, through the pass-through opening, smoke is gushing out at us generously.

"Well," says La-La, who alone among us has not moved a muscle, "that is one way to deal with a kitchen cockroach." And looking out through the still-open door at the chef lying in a smoking tangle on top of Greenie, he revises his assessment. "Or should I say *two* cockroaches."

It is all over, as they say, but the shouting, although in this case I can confirm that a great deal of shouting has already been done, enough, surely, to satisfy everyone. Most of the birthday partygoers bid a hurried farewell to La-La, then leg it out the door briskly for parts unknown. A few of us linger to extricate Greenie from the human projectile which K.O.'s him and discover that, as we might have expected, the projectile himself is not going to be redecorating any more cakes in this world.

"It's a shame," I tell La-La, "that your birthday party is disrupted."

He gives a shrug as if disrupted birthday parties have plagued him all his life. "I'm only glad that nobody gets hurt." I think that by this he must mean himself, since several of the well-wishers are suffering from smoke inhalation, the innocent Greensleeves McKeckney has fractured ribs, and the human projectile a broken neck. "The important thing,"

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says La-La, "is that I am now at long last sure about who I am dealing with. I thought those threats had something to do with Tee Ball—my mind was on him, you know—and now I am certain of it." He slaps ceiling dust off his long cashmere coat, gives me a nod, and steps into a waiting car.

"Happy birthday," I call out after him.

I pick up the details the very next day. Yelp Lauder finds a Windsor newspaper—an old one scrounged from back issues at the National Cigar Store—and this paper comments on Tee-Ball's misfortune, and quotes "sources" as pronouncing the episode to be "most certainly an out-of-town job—a settling of old scores." Also it is found that Boy Michael, the Westbrook chef, was accosted and biffed last night. Bonked on the beano. Trussed with twine and shouldered into the storage room like a sack of last year's turnips, so the killer—the would-be killer, that is—can have the kitchen all to himself, there to carry out his nefarious purpose, there to implant within La-La's cake a personal ingredient, there to add a personalized inscription and finally to sally forth in person to perform the serving up of this culinary blockbuster.

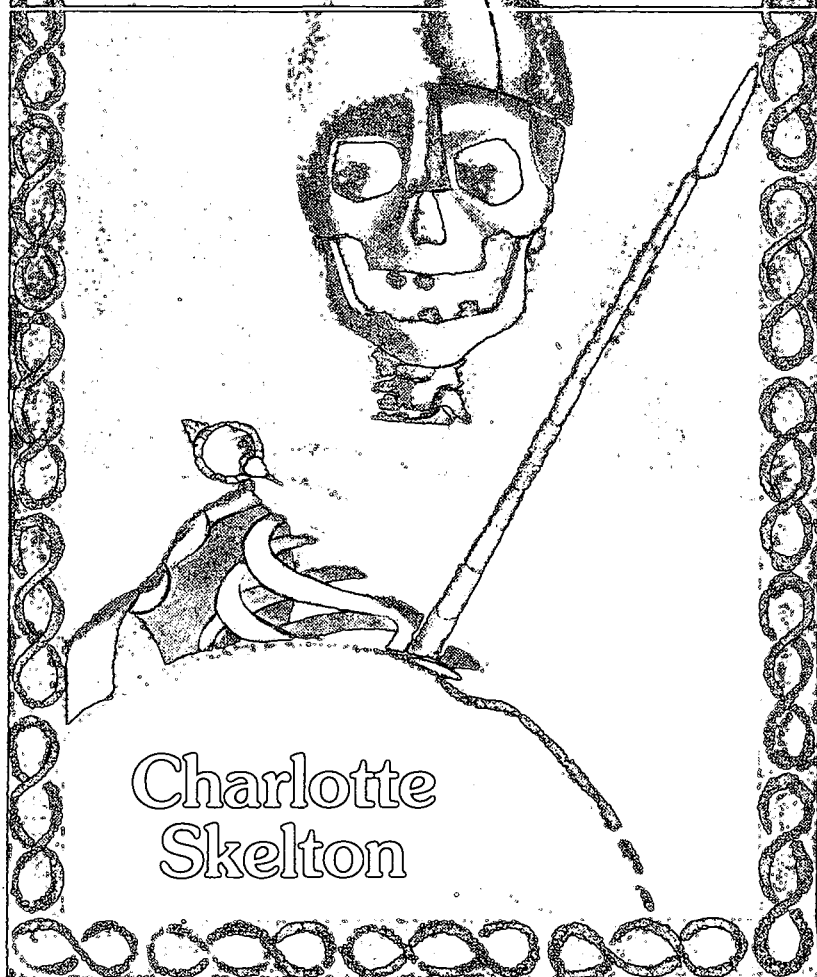
As for the authorities, they are informed that the explosion is the unfortunate result of a gas oven malfunction, which is curious when you are aware that the oven in question is an electric model. This clarification, however, apparently suits the inspectors. It suits the rest of us, who are not anxious to confront the authorities, and it suits also Donny Rumano, whose main concern is to process his insurance claim. It would even suit, I am sure, the late human projectile, who was—I am confident in saying this—not an ardent supporter of the police department in any way, shape, or form.

And La-La, being La-La, brings this off. La-La, being La-La, has a wonderful way with people. He not only convinces the authorities of this gas oven angle but ensures that all other persons involved in the matter are completely satisfied with his explanation.

And I think *that* is the secret of life.

FICTION

# THE SAMHAIN SKELETON



Charlotte  
Skelton

*Illustration by Louise Goldenberg*

*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 11/99*

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**H**e'd set out late from Waking, his handcart eventually filled with the extra pieces of the substantial red pottery they made there from the famous brickearth. The order of bricks for his mistress's new building was in the big cart, pulled by the roan. Two carts were quite a handful for one man, especially in this weather, but they had done the journey so many times lately that both he and the horse could have probably found their way blindfolded. For this reason Gyrth had simply tied the leading rein to his own cart, trusting that the horse would just plod along behind.

It was the pots that had caused the trouble, and Gyrth mentally cursed Aelfric, the kitchen slave, for his carelessness. He was always dropping the water pitchers or chipping the bowls, but Eadgyth his mistress, typically, wouldn't even have him thrashed, let alone turn him out of the house altogether, which is what would have happened to most careless servants. She just shrugged it off and told Gyrth to be sure to collect a few extra pots when he next went to the brickfields.

Everything had conspired to delay him. First the weather. It had been raining for days, and everything was soaked. Not the gentle warm rain of his native Wessex, but the bitterly cold, biting rain brought by the relentless, unforgiving east wind. The raised trackway across the brickfields was waterlogged, the water running over the sides and into the ditches. He'd arrived late because of this only to discover that the firing had been delayed by the

rain and they were only just emptying the kiln. Then the packing for the pottery—finding dry straw had taken time. The more impatient he became, the more slowly they all seemed to move, throwing him grudging, furtive glances all the while.

He had been disappointed to find that Stephen the foreman wasn't there. He was in Shobury overseeing a shipment of bricks up the Thames, and without him there was no hot drink in the warmth of the hut next to the kilns and no one with any authority over the laborers. Time meant nothing in this place of endless flat, featureless marshland, and his own exhortations to them to hurry, for his mistress was waiting, had been met with the empty, expressionless stares of folk who had lost all sense of urgency years ago. It was said that those who lived so near the marshes were elf-touched or cursed. Shrugging philosophically as he took the weight of the cart onto the leather harness round his waist, Gyrth decided that it was more a case of the utter desolation of the place eating into men's souls.

He shouldn't have set out for home at all, of course. It was the Eve of Samhain, or, in these still uneasily Christian times, All Souls' Eve. Either way, it wasn't a night to be out after dark: the night when dead men's souls cross the bridge of swords and walk their old haunts once again. All along the road for the last mile or two this morning he'd seen small offerings of food and ale laid by doorways so the departed would have sustenance for

their night of wandering. Such gifts would reassure them that their relatives, still living, hadn't forgotten them and would turn them aside from the mischief, or worse, that they would wreak if they thought otherwise. Gyrth couldn't ever decide whether such stories were true. Mistress Eadgyth said he should only believe in things that he could experience for himself, but as with the new Christian faith, it was wise to hedge one's bets. It didn't do to upset the gods of a place or to go against the old ways without good reason.

If he hadn't been so late, he would easily have been up as far as Hadleigh by dark, well on his way to Maldon and home. If he hadn't been so irritated with the brickfield workers, he thought ruefully, he could have waited for Stephen, the foreman, and begged his hospitality for the night.

As it was, he was out on the trackway that led to Southchurch now, the handcart bumping and jolting behind him as he wove from side to side trying to find the driest and smoothest parts of the road. He was already soaked through, fresh mud caking what had dried on his leggings this morning. On a day like this he could see why the people thought themselves cursed. Their landscape certainly was!

Too late to reconsider now. It was late in the afternoon, and the shadows were already lengthening. It would probably have been dark by now had there not been a full moon, and although intermittently obscured by the scudding rainclouds, it gave off eerily sudden shafts of

piercing brilliance. The few trees that hadn't been grubbed up to make way for the brickfields glared at him, the tops of their bare branches disappearing into the twilight.

He would press on for a while, he thought; as long as he sought shelter by full dark he would be safe from malevolent spirits. If all else failed, he would stop at the priest's house in Southchurch. He would prefer not to be in a Christian house tonight, but beggars couldn't be choosers. A household where they appreciated the old ways would be best, gathered round the fire, snug against the weather and marauding spirits, telling stories of ghosts and goblins.

The trackway turned the corner sharply and began to slope gently downward. Although the incline was almost imperceptible in this land of perpetual flatness, it was enough, in wet slippery conditions, to make the handcart almost impossible to control. He had to lean back against it and dig his heels hard into the mud to stop himself from being catapulted forward, but that brought him sharp up against the horse, who, being four-footed, didn't have the same problem. The horse, indignant at encountering an unexpected obstacle, snorted and then attempted to continue his rudely interrupted journey, as anxious as Gyrth to get home and into the dry. It suddenly began to rain even harder just as the helplessly floundering Gyrth realized that he would have to let go and jump to the side or be overwhelmed by the combined weight of two carts and the horse.



Just at that moment he heard a shout and sticky splashing from behind him. Slowly two figures appeared, one taking charge of the horse while the other helped Gyrth steady his cart so that, between them, carts, man, and horse were brought safely to a halt. They all stood regaining their breath, and Gyrth gratefully greeted Stephen, the foreman from the brickfield, and his son William.

Gyrth liked Stephen. He was a solid, dependable Welshman, his speech still betraying his origins. His reliability and honesty made it easy to do business with him, and as trusted and respected servants of their respective employers, there was a natural bond between them. It had begun with comradely conversations whilst overseeing the loading of an order, but Stephen's native gift for words and the tales he told made Gyrth anticipate his regular visits with pleasure.

Stephen had an amazing memory for the stories and songs he gleaned from every passing pedlar and transformed with his special gifts into small works of art. Gyrth had questioned him about this once and asked where he had learned the technique. Stephen had shaken his head and refused to say any more than that he had begun training for a bard but wouldn't say what had happened. Over the months Gyrth had come to respect Stephen, to admire his patience with his dead-eyed workers, and finally to be honored to call him friend.

"Thank the gods," Gyrth exclaimed. "I thought I was going to

lose it all. Where did you spring from?"

"We got back to the field and discovered you'd been and gone. We were delayed at the jetty. This cursed rain. You can't get home tonight. And it's Samhain! You are welcome under my roof. The Lady Eadgyth brings good custom to the fields. It's the least we can do."

"Then I'm gladly beholden to you. I don't want to spend tonight of all nights under a hedge. I accept your offer with . . ." His voice tailed off as he caught sight of William's expression. The lad's face had gone white, mouth gaping, his hair plastered against his head, the rain running in rivulets down his cheeks. He was staring wide-eyed over Gyrth's shoulder into the ditch that ran beside the path, a look of absolute terror on his face.

Gyrth turned and followed his gaze, and understood. Lying in the ditch were the bones of a man, reflecting whitely in the gathering dusk. The rain had washed them almost clean, but there were little rivers of mud flowing over the ribs, making them look like a macabre, ossified waterfall.

"Jesu, protect us! What's that?"

"It . . . it's the Dane!" William was suddenly gibbering, clawing at his father's jerkin. "He's come back to haunt us! He'll never leave us alone now! I told you! We're cursed!"

Gyrth began to reassure the lad that, however horrific, the skeleton's sudden appearance was obviously the result of the torrential rain's washing it from its resting place rather than the forces of the supernatural. The bones of all races,

Dane, Saxon, and even Celt, were unfortunately all too common hereabouts, especially in the last few years with the Danish raids starting again. He was stopped in his tracks, however, by Stephen's extraordinary reaction.

Gyrth watched, dumbfounded, as Stephen peremptorily backhanded William across the face and knocked him to the ground.

"Quiet," he hissed, stooping down, holding William's face in his hands. "You sound like a woman! He's dead!" He shot a look at Gyrth and then, with his face only inches from William's and speaking slowly and clearly, as if trying to impress his words into his son's hysterical confusion, said, "Has been these long years. Bones don't walk. It's the rain. He's been washed out by the rain."

William lay in the mud sobbing and shaking while Stephen looked at Gyrth with an embarrassed laugh. "He's elf-shot. Can't cope with Samhain Eve. He takes after his mother," he continued confidentially, "always taken with imaginings. The young ones haven't seen the things we've seen, eh? Time was when you often saw bodies, when the Danes were overwintering at Shoebury every year, generations ago. But it's only been every now and again these last few years, so they're not used to it. Soft, the young ones."

Gyrth wasn't so sure. The lad had never struck him as "imaginative" or "soft," quite the contrary in fact. The product of decent, hard-working country folk, well used to the sight of the stripped bones of butchered animals at the very least,

even if he'd never seen a human corpse, which was unlikely in these days. And steady, he'd always thought. Not the type to go to pieces so quickly even though, he had to admit, the skeleton's sudden, spectral appearance on Samhain Eve *was* rather unnerving.

He stepped closer to the body. Stephen made as if to stop him and then thought better of it and turned to attend to the lad. The light was almost gone now, but Gyrth could see the outlines of helmet, sword, and shield. Definitely a Dane, then. There was a dull, dark, nonreflecting shape protruding through the ribs that he couldn't readily identify, although it could have been a spearhead.

The bones struck him as being old. Some of them were broken, and as the moon was suddenly uncovered, he was sure he could detect some yellowing contrasting with the reflecting whiteness, even in this poor light. Two bright round metal objects were also reflecting: silver armbands such as the Danes wore, beautiful workmanship, too, with intricate designs as fresh as the day they'd been made.

"What shall we do with him?" he asked. "We can't just leave him here."

"Why not?" retorted Stephen with unexpected savagery. "We've only just got rid of the buggers again. As if having one on the throne's not bad enough. Raping, stealing, plundering bastards." His voice rose. "Aye, leave him there for the crows."

"No!" William sat up on his haunches in the mud. "If we leave him, he'll wander tonight! Who

knows what harm he'll do! We've got to bury him again!" He floundered over to the corpse on his hands and knees and desperately began to pile mud from the ditch side over the skeleton. After a moment Stephen started to help him while Gyrth held the horse's head and wondered.

Yes. Everyone round these parts hated the Danes. They had seasonally raped and plundered their way across East Anglia in the old days, overwintering in Shoebury, making the place unusable as a port for the brickfields and the surrounding countryside uninhabitable for decent people. Not that there were many people left by then. At the first autumn sighting of a longship, the brickfield families slipped away to the marshes to await better times, only reemerging when the Danes put to sea in the spring and the threat had gone. By that time, of course, their locality had been devastated, but they had learned how to cope. They worked the brickfields through the spring and summer, planted their crops, harvested them, and then melted back into the autumn mists on the marshes, where the Danes dared not follow.

Things had changed with King Alfred of Wessex's rule and for three generations afterwards. Gyrth was biased, of course, being from Wessex himself, but all men had loved the strong ruler who stood up to the Danes, fought them on his own terms, and won. He had brought a peace to the country that lasted almost a hundred years. And with that peace had come renewed pros-

perity and a settled, more dependable existence.

The raids had begun again, however, when, about forty years ago, the Danes had turned their attention to the now prosperous England and realized that Ethelred Unraed wasn't made of the same metal as his great-grandfather. They regarded his solution of bribing them with "Danegeld" to persuade them to stay away as contemptible and cowardly. The Danes took the money and still kept raiding, having no respect for a bargain made with a nation whose king couldn't even be bothered to meet them in battle to defend his own.

To be fair, the second wave of raids hadn't been as much of a threat in this remote corner of southeast Essex in the last few years as it had been farther north. But folk hereabouts had had to learn to be cautious once again, and the stories of Danish atrocities passed down by their forefathers had rekindled their fear and loathing. It was only now, with the defeat of the Saxons at Ashingdon three years ago and the country's having a Danish king, Cnut, that the depredations had ceased and peace, albeit an uneasy and resentful one, had been established.

When father and son had finished their gruesome task, Stephen stood and said, matter-of-factly wiping his hands on his jerkin, "Well, we'll get on now. It's late, and we should all be indoors by dark." Without further ado, almost as if nothing had happened, he took the horse's bridle. William took one shaft of the handcart to make it

more stable, and they all continued their journey homeward.

As they walked, Gyrth mused about what had just happened. What had struck him as most odd was the way William had known it was the remains of a Dane straight-away, without having to get close enough to examine it.

Gyrth himself had had to look closely to see the weapons that identified it. William could not possibly have seen them from the track in the twilight darkness. But his first words had been, "It's the Dane!" That implied, Gyrth thought, that he not only knew it was a Dane, but also which *particular* Dane. In fact, come to think of it, Stephen knew it was a particular Dane, too. He'd accepted William's statement without question. He hadn't had to ask his son which Dane he meant.

What had William said?—"He's come back to haunt us! I told you!" And Stephen's reply, "He's dead. Has been these long years." It certainly sounded as if they both knew which Dane they meant.

Stephen's reaction to William's outburst had also been rather excessive. Gyrth had never heard Stephen raise his voice before, let alone his hand, not even to his exasperatingly slow laborers. His savage inclination to leave the Dane's bones for the crows was also completely out of character. Perhaps he had more reason than most to loathe the men from the longships. But you never knew what people might have suffered. Gyrth sensed there was a mystery here, but this was neither the time nor the place to start prying into other folks' secrets.

Stephen's home was fairly commodious by local standards, as befitted a man in some authority. It was built on a shallow rise just where the hamlet of Southchurch began, on a site where legend had it that once, long ago, folk had lived in huts built on stilts above the water.

The land was drained now, and the house commanded quite a view of the endless flatness that stretched out on all sides. It was a long, single-roomed dwelling, built of wattle and daub with a thatched roof and surrounded by a stockade of hazel hurdles to keep the animals in. Smoke curled cheerfully from the roof hole, and the welcome sound of laughter and chattering came from inside as they approached.

When Stephen pushed aside the leather door-curtain, they were met by a blast of hot smoky air and the mouthwatering smell of cooking. Gyrth suddenly realized how hungry he was and was overcome by a wave of gratitude to his rescuers. He would push the niggling doubts in the back of his mind away for tonight. Such thoughts were unworthy towards a man who had just shown him such neighborliness and hospitality. Indeed, the ancient rules of hospitality meant it would be impossible for him to refer to the Sea-Wolf in the ditch again tonight.

Having thus propitiated his curious spirit, Gyrth shed his wet outer clothing and boots at Stephen's wife's insistence that he would "catch his death" if he didn't and settled down in a corner by the fire to enjoy a civilized Samhain Eve.

The conversation during supper

centered on local gossip. Stephen's family was gathered round the fire, three generations. People tended to stay close these days. His daughters had married brothers from two or three villages away, and Gyrth remembered that some of the locals had considered this irresponsible. Folk from other villages were thought to be at best unreliable and at worst strange. But Stephen had shrugged these objections aside. After all, he'd said, how could he, a man from Wales who had married here, prevent his daughters from marrying lads from down the lane?

Gyrth remembered that he had relayed this story to his mistress at the time. The Lady Eadgyth had listened carefully as she always did and then said that Stephen sounded like a strong-minded man, un-hypocritical and fair-minded in his dealings, and that she was glad they did business with him. Both Stephen's sons-in-law had turned out to be quite normal; too, hardworking, honest, and able to father strong children.

One daughter had brought her two small children to celebrate Samhain in Stephen's house. They snuggled under a sheepskin, wide-eyed and silent, lest the adults remember they were there and send them to bed. Gyrth assumed that the other daughter—who, he now remembered, was pregnant—had stayed at home with her husband's family.

By tradition, after a supper of pork stew and huge hunks of barley bread (from the same baking that had been left out-of-doors for

potential spirit visitors), there was the telling of bloodcurdling tales involving witches, ghosts, and demons of all descriptions. As the tellers grew more lubricated by jugs of small ale, the stories became increasingly elaborate until they left the realms of the "perhaps possible" and became pure fantasy. They were spine-chilling enough, though, with the added spice of this particular night's atmosphere.

Gyrth noticed, however, that none of the stories involved anything local. All their tales began, "Once upon a time, up-country." It was as if everyone round the fire shared an understanding.

He had never encountered this before. Most Samhain stories involved local ghosts, the more local the better, in fact. You were far more likely to be properly scared if you thought you might actually meet the ghost of the story! His curiosity was pricked, with the result that during the next lull in the tale-telling he asked innocently, "How about the ghost of the Dane at Benfleet? You've surely heard of him down here. We've many tales up in Maldon from people who've seen him. He actually spoke to my wife's cousin last winter. Very distressed he was, too, by all accounts, asking if Eathled had seen his ship."

If he had wanted a reaction, he wasn't disappointed. It was as if he had thrown freezing water from the trough all over them.

Everyone in the room stopped talking, even those sitting round the edges, who'd only half heard him. No one met his gaze as he looked round speculatively.



The only sound was the crackling of the fire. Gyrth realized that, despite his best intentions not to upset his host tonight, he had inadvertently put the proverbial cat amongst the pigeons. He cursed himself for a fool. If these folk did have something suspicious to hide, he'd been stupid to rouse their suspicions. Well, he'd just have to brazen it out.

Stephen, however, thought for a moment or two, cleared his throat, and glanced round at the others as if for agreement or support. "Well, actually, in this family we don't talk openly about the Benfleet Dane. We've particular reason to know the truth, you see. But you've been coming to the brickfields so long now, Gyrth, that you're almost family yourself. You've danced at my daughters' weddings. I know you can be trusted not to blab, and it's all such a long time ago anyway. And, well, it is Samhain. I don't see any harm in telling you our secret."

With these words the atmosphere in the room changed instantly, but not in the way that Gyrth had expected. Most villages had secrets. Years of Danish raids and uncertain times meant that folk tended to keep their secrets well hidden from people outside their immediate circle. There was no sense upsetting the apple cart, as they said in the West Country. But this was different. The air was as full of tension as a bow before it's loosed. No one met his eye. In fact, everyone was staring either at the fire or at his feet. No one was daring to look at Stephen either, and he was carefully focusing his eyes somewhere

in the space between the fire and the rafters. Gyrth's instinct told him that although everyone was waiting for the story to be told no one was sure what it would be.

"As you know," Stephen began, "there's a Dane buried in the ditch on the road to the brickfield."

Mouths gaped at this extraordinarily irresponsible statement. A warning murmur went round the room, and eyes flickered over to Gyrth. Stephen waved his hand reassuringly.

"It's all right. Gyrth knows about it. The bugger was washed out in front of our eyes tonight. Gave us all a nasty turn, I can tell you!" His tone was light-hearted, but it did nothing to dispel the tension in the room.

William leaned forward. "What about the Dane, Father? Tell us about the Dane!"

"He's been there many a long year. Since the reign of Good King Alfred, in fact." Did Gyrth now detect a relaxing in the atmosphere round the fire? He wasn't sure, but everyone was certainly settling down for one of Stephen's famous stories.

"I wasn't involved, of course. Even I'm not that old." Smiles all round now. "But I got the story from my good wife's grandfather, who got it from his grandfather to whom it happened. Ceolwulf, that was his name, and his brother . . . Edward?" He looked over to his wife for confirmation. She nodded, and he continued. "And Edward, his brother, had gone to Winchester that winter with a delivery of pottery for King Alfred's court."

“What? On their own? With the Danes about?” Gyrth couldn’t help himself, for all that it was considered extremely bad manners to interrupt a story once it was under way. Stephen assumed a pained, higher-moral-ground expression.

“Ah, well, that was Ceolwulf all over. Greedy. And if you let me finish, you’ll see that greed plays a large part in what happened, and in how the Dane ended up in the ditch.”

Thus rebuked, Gyrth fell silent.

“Right, where was I? Pots to Winchester. Well, Alfred wasn’t there, of course. He was off somewhere dealing with the Danes. Anyway, Ceolwulf and Edward were on their way home when all this happened. They were back in Essex following the main road but mistook the path through the woods on the ridge, near Thunor’s Grove. There are several paths through the woods there that bring you down to the shore, but they took the wrong one, not knowing the area very well.

“It was late in the afternoon, and then the marsh mist began to curl in off the sea. All you can do is take shelter, as you know, so that’s what they did. They found refuge in the nearest place, which turned out to be a charcoal burner’s hut. The man was hospitable enough once he’d recovered from the shock of having strangers knock at his door. As he explained, they’d chosen a very bad time to get lost.”

Stephen paused for effect, and took a draught of his ale. Every eye in the room was on him, and although Gyrth was as absorbed as everyone else, an irritating voice in

his head kept telling him that he was witnessing a performance. But was it a performance of the truth, or was it straight from Stephen’s famous imagination? Just because a man has skill in recounting events doesn’t mean those events aren’t true, he chided himself.

“Definitely a bad time. The woods were swarming with armed men.” There were gasps from the listeners. Stephen smiled triumphantly at their reaction and looked round the room mischievously, judging his next words. “Fortunately, they were ours!” Everyone grinned nervously and relaxed.

“The Danish leader Hæsten had set up his garrison at Benfleet that winter. He’d left his wife and children there by all accounts and gone off plundering somewhere. A proper garrison it was, too, with an earth bank and ditch on the higher ground just by the creek, and those devil-spawned boats pulled up on the mud. In for a long stay and making themselves comfortable, they were. But they’d reckoned without King Alfred, or rather his son and son-in-law.”

The listeners nodded wisely to each other. Alfred’s military prowess, and that of his family, were legendary. Stephen continued.

“Our lads had made their way stealthily towards the garrison, arriving in small, unobtrusive groups over several days, some through the woods and some through the marshes. The charcoal burner knew all this, of course. Those people know every byway and every track. He’d seen them quietly slipping by and had actually guided some of them

himself. He'd reckoned they were going to ambush the garrison. And he was right. Unfortunately for Ceolwulf and Edward, it happened that very night. Although they were quite a distance away, they could hear everything clearly.

"Our lads mounted a surprise attack under the cover of darkness, and there was such a noise as you never heard, men yelling and screaming, the clash of weapons, and so on. Ceolwulf and Edward could hear and smell that something was burning fiercely, too, and the sky was lit up with huge fires. They were terrified, of course, and spent the whole night indoors, praying that it would be soon over and that our lads would be victorious. The noise kept up fiercely for several hours and then gradually died away, although they still heard isolated screams right through the night.

"In the morning, however, everything was deathly quiet. The charcoal burner offered to lead them through the woods and to the path for home, but their curiosity (and I have to say greed) got the better of them. They persuaded him to take them down a secret trackway to the Danish camp to see what had happened in the night. Ceolwulf reckoned there might be some pickings.

"Such a scene of devastation greeted them! Straight from hell it was. Our lads had gone, vanished into the dawn, their victory complete. They later discovered that Alfred's men had even managed to take Hæsten's wife and children as hostages. There was nothing living left. The garrison was ransacked.

The earth wall was still there, but all the Sea-Wolves' boats were burned, still smoking down on the creek. There were bodies everywhere, and crows already picking at them. And nothing worth taking. Our lads had taken every bit of silver and so on. Well, I suppose they deserved it!

"Having had a quick look round and discovered there were no spoils of war, Ceolwulf and Edward decided to disappear fairly sharpish. They didn't want Hæsten and the main Danish army coming back and finding them there. They were just leaving when they heard the most terrible commotion outside and thought they must have already left it too late. There was the sound of shouting and wailing and sobbing, all coming through the morning mist off the creek. Really put the wind up them, I can tell you!

"There wasn't time to get out of the enclosure, so they hid behind a cart, hoping to be able to slip away later. Peering out, they saw a terrible sight. A Dane. A single Dane. All alone. All that noise was coming from just one man! Raving with grief he was. Wandering among the bodies, slashing wildly at nothing with his sword. Every now and again he would scream with rage at the sky, shaking his fists.

"He was completely demented. First they thought he must have been sent mad by the battle, but as they listened, they realized that it was all because he had *missed* the battle. It was difficult to understand what he was saying, what with the shouting and that terrible accent they have, and of course a lot of their

words are different from ours, but they eventually worked out the reason for his ravings.

"He had missed the battle. Why, they didn't know. Perhaps he was off foraging for firewood or, more likely, raping some of the local girls. Anyway, he'd not been there, so he hadn't fought and he wasn't dead. All his grief and anger were because he was still alive. You know how strange they are. All they live for is to die. They want to die in battle and get burned on those huge pyres, or get put in a fired longship and pushed out to sea, and that way, they think, they'll go straight to Valhalla.

"Well, Ceolwulf and Edward decided to get out of there as quickly as they could. The last thing they needed was to meet up with a Dane in that state, especially one with something to prove.

"But things didn't go according to plan. Getting off a battlefield isn't as easy as you might think. They waited until he was wandering in the opposite direction and then began to edge their way round the earth wall. But there are all sorts of things lying around. Edward tripped over a sword and cut his foot, and then Ceolwulf slipped on some guts and fell over a shield, making a terrible clatter.

"By that time the Dane had heard them and come running. They don't half move fast, too, for all that they are so big and carry swords that no ordinary man can lift. Anyway, there they were, backs against the earth wall and this Dane waving his sword in front of their noses. They thought their time had come,

I can tell you! But nothing happened. They all just stood there looking at each other."

Stephen paused to take another drink. No one moved. The only sound was the crackling of the fire. The spell woven by the story was completely mesmerizing.

"Gradually the Dane seemed to grow calm, the self-induced battle lust drained. He lowered his sword and indicated to them that he would do them no harm. He hunkered down and seemed completely overwhelmed—just crouched there dazed and drained. It took a while before Ceolwulf and Edward relaxed, too, and began to try to edge away. But that wasn't to be. Before they'd gone more than a few steps, he began howling again, so Ceolwulf decided that they'd have to gain his confidence first and then try to slip away.

"He was so wretched that it took a lot of perseverance to even get him talking, and understanding him was very difficult, but at last they confirmed what they'd thought. His name was Eric. He'd been away that afternoon collecting kindling. The mist had come down, and like them, he'd taken shelter. He'd returned to find everyone dead, killed honorably defending their chieftain's women. He wanted to die a hero's death in battle, too. But he'd been cheated. Not only that, but if Hæsten came back and discovered that Eric's body wasn't there, he would not only never get into Valhalla, he would be condemned as a coward forever, his spirit endlessly wandering, never able to rest.

"What to do? How to get away? But as they were searching for a solution, Eric's distracted, tormented mind came up with an answer to his problem. Ceolwulf and Edward would have to fight him instead. He would promise not to resist too energetically and would let himself be killed. They were to leave his body with the others. No one would know that he'd died later. He'd be burned as a hero with his companions and enter Valhalla. In return they could have their escape and his silver torc.

"Ceolwulf and Edward weren't at all sure about this at first, as you can imagine. There were two of them, it was true, but neither of them had ever held anything more threatening than a scythe, and they were up against a battle-trained professional. As for his promise not to try too hard and not to hurt them, what did that mean exactly? Neither of them relished being even a bit damaged. And would it count anyway? they inquired. Surely letting yourself be killed didn't qualify you for Valhalla. But Eric was desperate. He and they were enemies, he reminded them, and had been for generations. Fighting each other definitely qualified; besides, if they didn't agree, he'd kill them anyway and it would be their bodies on the pyre instead of his.

"And so the deal was struck. Ceolwulf and Edward reckoned it was their only chance of getting away before the main Danish army returned, and so, under Eric's watchful eye, they hunted around the garrison for swords. They found shields, too (just in case), and Edward pulled

a spear out of a Dane's chest. When they were ready, they set to.

"In the event it didn't last long. Whilst Ceolwulf and Eric were circling each other, Edward simply stabbed Eric in the back with the spear and that was that. Which would have been all very well except for what happened next. They decided to have the last laugh on Eric after all. They hated the Danes with good reason, as do we all, and they reckoned they didn't owe him any favors, least of all leaving his body with his comrades to ensure his entry into Valhalla. They took his silver torc (what did I say about greed?), loaded his body onto the cart that they'd used for the delivery to Winchester, and trundled him back to Wakering, where they buried him with his sword, helmet, and shield in the ditch alongside the track to the brickfield."

The atmosphere around the fire was one of grim satisfaction, but Stephen hadn't finished.

"Betrayal," he continued, "even of a Dane, is a serious thing and events took a turn for the worse almost immediately. It turned out that a few Danes had escaped the carnage at Benfleet, and they soon met up with the remnants of Hæsten's army. They all set up a new winter camp at Shoebury, not half a mile from where Eric was buried. Then the cut on Edward's foot went bad and left him crippled. Not only that but Ceolwulf couldn't sell the torc anywhere. No one would touch it, not with the Danes so near. Eventually they had to melt it down and use the silver bit by bit. Then came the first rumors of a ghost wandering

round Benfleet asking if anyone had seen his ship. Eric might be buried at Wakering, but his spirit was still scaring the living daylight out of the folk up at Benfleet."

Stephen finally leaned back, his story brought to a sobering conclusion. There was a new stillness round the fire as his family considered the implications of their ancestors' actions.

"Why, though?" asked someone. "Why is he wandering? He got what he wanted. He was killed in battle."

"Ah well, there's the problem. He was killed right enough, but Edward had speared him in the back before a blow was struck, so it probably didn't count. And then there was the matter of his being burned on the pyre so he could join his friends in Valhalla. They'd promised him and then didn't do it. And they took his torc, too, which was his payment for all this. All in all, they betrayed him and that's an end of it. No wonder his spirit wanders! But that's in Benfleet, and that's why we don't let on that their ghostly problem is our fault. And that's why we've a skeleton in our ditch."

"Why didn't you do something when you started getting all that bad luck?" inquired Gyrth. "Surely if you'd burned him . . ."

"What, with all those Danes camped in Shoebury? Ceolwulf had enough trouble keeping his family alive and away from the Danes. He wasn't going to do anything to attract their attention."

Gyrth nodded. It sounded reasonable enough. Life with the Danes in your back yard was certainly no easy thing.

The atmosphere was beginning to relax now as if the telling of the story had somehow exorcised all the unasked questions of the last years. The body in the ditch somewhere by the brickfield that they'd known about for generations was explained at last.

The evening drew to a close soon afterwards with a feeling of grim acceptance, and everyone took to their sleeping places. Gyrth, as the guest, had a cosy place with his feet near the fire. He curled round on his side, head resting on his arm, staring at the embers, letting his mind flow over the day's strange events. No wonder some of the folk round here had dead eyes. What must some of them have seen in those last terrible years? That skeleton had given him a nasty turn. And poor William! The lad had really panicked. Small wonder, really.

Gyrth felt himself dozing. He was warm and dry and comfortable, hovering in the world between consciousness and dreams, when the voice in his head said sharply, But it's not right, is it? It still doesn't make sense.

But Gyrth was too far gone to pay it any attention.

**M**orning came and with it a change in the weather. Gyrth took his leave, heading towards Maldon and home. He did the journey easily in two days with no further adventures or unpleasant surprises on the way. The rain had finally stopped, and it turned very cold, with bright, piercing sunshine that hurt his eyes. The gloomy



waterlogged grip of Samhain had gone. But inevitably as he walked he thought, and began to consider some of the questions that were nagging him.

On the face of it, everything seemed to have been explained by Stephen's story last night. But wasn't it a bit too neat? All his questions were answered, weren't they, from the presence of the skeleton in the ditch right down to the ghost of the Dane in Benfleet?

But Stephen was renowned for his stories. Perhaps last night had simply been a wonderful performance.

All the way home Gyrth chewed over his feelings of uncertainty. Several times he decided that the best course of action was to ignore his suspicions. After all, Stephen and his family trusted him and had taken him into their confidence. Whatever they'd done to a Dane, it was a long time ago, and the Danes *were* invaders, for Thor's sake! They knew the risks when they tried to take something that wasn't theirs. They'd simply got what was coming to them. But the voice in his head murmured that it would still be nice to know the truth, whatever action he decided on afterwards. After all, it wasn't as if he could do anything about it anyway, whatever he discovered.

And so he worried away at the inconsistencies all the way back to Maldon. By the time he'd delivered the bricks to the builders and the pottery down into the kitchen he knew what his next course of action should be. He went to report to his mistress.

Gyrth was very lucky with his mistress, and knew it. The Lady Eadgyth was tall and willowy, graceful in her movements and gentle in her nature. She had married her late husband for love, and when she was widowed and left comfortably provided for, she had seen no reason to remarry. Yes, Eadgyth was a most unusual woman. But that, as Gyrth had soon discovered, was typical of her. She had been gently born and well educated. She read several languages and knew the writings of philosophers and theologians, astronomers and scientists from times long gone. She was a fair, compassionate mistress, who took a keen interest in all her servants and their well-being.

Gyrth daily thanked all the gods for giving him such an employer. On his return from each journey or errand, he always reported to Eadgyth, who, despite rarely leaving her manor, mysteriously seemed to know more about the country's affairs than any traveling pedlar.

She was sitting in her solar reading when Gyrth entered and made his obeisance. She greeted him warmly and inquired after his journey. Gyrth thought for a moment and then said, "Actually, my lady, if you've time later, I would appreciate your advice with a problem I encountered at Wakering."

"Not a problem with the bricks, I think. You seem much too preoccupied for that! Sit down straight away and tell me all about it."

"Well, to tell the truth, lady, at the moment I don't even know where to start. I'd rather go over it

more in my own mind before I bring it to you.”

“How long did it take you to get back from Wakering? Two days? Three? You’ve thought about it long enough I should say! Spoken words have a power of their own, Gyrth, more than those that simply remain as thought. The very act of speaking of them gives them life. Don’t worry about getting your thoughts into order. Just start at the beginning. I’ll ask you about anything that’s not clear.”

So Gyrth settled down on the stool at Eadgyth’s feet and took a deep breath. He began with leaving the brickfield on Samhain Eve and described everything clearly as it had happened. He took special care to repeat Stephen’s story of that evening as accurately as he could remember it.

Eadgyth leaned back thoughtfully as he finished. “I understand what you mean about Stephen’s stories. Maybe I’ll have to invite him here to entertain us at the next feast, Christ’s Mass perhaps. He certainly has talent. So what worries you? Think carefully. What is it that strikes you as strange?”

Gyrth considered. “Well, some things are obvious, aren’t they? First of all, William seemed to know immediately that it was a Dane lying in the ditch. It was just a skeleton, but he knew that it wasn’t that of a local person. The light was fading, and I had to look carefully to see that it had a sword and helmet and so on, but he didn’t need to.”

“Good. So William knew it was a Dane. Quite an assumption, unless he already had good reason to know

it was. What else did you notice when you looked at the skeleton?”

“The bones themselves looked old, although it was a bit difficult to tell in the light. They seemed yellow, and some were cracked. But there was something odd I can’t quite put my finger on . . .” His voice tailed away, his forehead furrowing as he struggled to remember.

“Try thinking about what else was lying there. You mentioned a sword and helmet. What did they look like?”

“They were both corroded and rusty. Just the usual, I suppose. I haven’t seen that many. There was another piece of metal as well, and that was dark and dull. I thought it might have been a spearhead. It was lying among the bones. I suppose that’s what killed him. And then there were the armbands. They were so beautiful, all knots and whorls, shining in the moonlight.”

“Shining? Are you sure? What were they made of?”

“Silver. Yes, definitely silver. But . . .” Gyrth suddenly realized what had struck him as odd. “They were silver,” he exclaimed, “but they were fresh! Completely clean and untarnished. But it’s been raining for weeks. Silver tarnishes in no time if you don’t wear it. The armbands can’t have been there longer than a few hours.”

Eadgyth leaned back contentedly in her chair. “Now we’re beginning to see a picture. Problems are like a tapestry, Gyrth. A few stitches a day. Put them together, and a picture begins to emerge, little by

little. But we must be cautious. Sometimes a few stitches on their own show a picture, too, but it's only a part of the finished work.

"So, here we have William, almost driven out of his wits by a skeleton that he appears to recognize immediately. The bones seem old and the weapons are rusty and corroded, but the silver with them is new, only a few hours in the ground. And why should William be so afraid? If he recognized the bones, he knew they were really old. He knew they were from the Benfleet Dane and that the ghost only haunts those parts and not Wakering. Why should he be so fearful? He would know that the Dane posed no threat to them." She paused, tapping her fingernail on her teeth. "Tell me again. What did William say when he first saw the bones?"

Gyrth concentrated. "He said, 'It's the Dane. He's come back to haunt us. He'll never leave us alone now. We're cursed.' And Stephen said, 'He's dead. Has been these many long years,' or something like that. It certainly sounds as if they both knew what they were on about. But then . . . that's odd! When Stephen was starting the story that evening, William said, 'Tell us about the Dane. What about the Dane?' Why should he say that if he already knew?"

"Perhaps he wanted Stephen to tell everyone about the Dane. They all seemed to know there was a Dane there, from what you say. Maybe they didn't know the full story, and William wanted his father to tell everyone."

"But it doesn't make sense. If William didn't know the full circumstances of the Dane's being there, why was he so afraid of it? And if he did know the full story, he had no reason to be afraid because he knew it wasn't haunting in this area. Why did he think it might haunt the family? Remember he said, 'It's the Dane, he's come back to haunt us.' Why should he think that?"

"Perhaps William knew and none of the others did. Perhaps it's something that Stephen had told him and no one else," Eadgyth said. "But no, then William would've said, 'Tell *them* about the Dane,' not 'Tell *us* about the Dane,' wouldn't he?"

"There's no other explanation then, is there? Either both men knew about the Dane, or only Stephen knew. It's got to be one or the other. Stephen definitely knew. He told the story, after all. And William must've known or he wouldn't have been so scared. But it doesn't make sense."

"It doesn't," said Eadgyth, "but I think we've got only some of the stitches. They're making a picture of their own, but it's not the right one. When are you going to Wakering again?"

"Just before the Solstice—sorry, my lady, the Christ's Mass I should say. I'll be back in time for the feast."

"There's no need to apologize, Gyrth. I have no quarrel with the old beliefs. Let's just say that you'll be going there again in five weeks' time or so. That being the case, I think you could take up my suggestion and invite Stephen back for the feast. A bard of his abilities

would be a welcome addition to the festivities.”

“I’m sure he would be honored, my lady. By then we may have some answers.”

“I have a tapestry to finish before Christ’s Mass, Gyrth.” Eadgyth indicated the frame standing in the corner. “I will give it my full attention.”

**T**he eve of the Christ’s Mass came. Gyrth and Stephen sat in the Hall of Eadgyth’s manor before the huge Yule log that had been brought in from the woods that afternoon. The room was decorated with greenery, ivy and holly, that they had all gone out to collect earlier, Eadgyth herself leading the way.

The midwinter festivities were a huge affair in Eadgyth’s household. Everyone had a holiday, the minimum of work being done for the whole twelve days, and there was feasting, dancing, entertainment, and drinking aplenty. The local priest came and celebrated Mass. Eadgyth was unusual in that she didn’t expect her servants to follow her beliefs out of obligation to her as most masters did. All were free to celebrate in their own way. Everyone, however, was cheerfully present at the Mass, to the annual amazement of the priest, who had yet to work out that obligations come in two forms, duty and love. After the Mass, Eadgyth paid the quarter-day wages and gave everyone a small present.

Gyrth was explaining all this to a disbelieving Stephen as they sat

there in the warmth. Good masters were almost unheard of, let alone one like Eadgyth, and Gyrth found himself wondering again at his own good fortune.

The festivities went on day after day, and Stephen more than earned his place at Eadgyth’s fire. He had a tremendous number of songs and tales, many remembered from his native Wales and new to the folk of Essex. His voice was pleasant, the lilt making it mesmerizing to listen to and lulling his audience into a relaxed sense of well-being.

The evenings passed merrily until Twelfth Night when, at Eadgyth’s request, Stephen had promised to give them the newly composed “Battle of Maldon,” the true story of the ill-fated heroism of Earl Brythnoth, whom Eadgyth had known as a child and who had perished so recently within an hour’s ride of the manor. That afternoon she invited Stephen into the solar to discuss the poem, which she had only heard of by reputation, and asked Gyrth to join them.

The conversation was interesting but polite, and Gyrth, who knew his mistress’s manner, realized that she had more on her mind than the poem. She thanked Stephen enthusiastically for his services over the feast and gave him a small but heavy bag of silver for his trouble.

“You must tell me, Stephen, where do you get all these marvelous stories from? Gyrth tells me you trained as a bard. Is that right? Are they bardic tales?”

“Forgive me, lady, it’s a time in my life that I don’t like to dwell up-

on. Some of my tales, the oldest ones, *are* those handed down in the bardic schools. They are taught as mere outlines, skeletons if you will. It is a measure of the individual bard's skill how he clothes these bare bones and makes the story come alive. But truly, many of my stories are from folk that I meet, pedlars, travelers, people who come to the brickfields on business, even relatives."

"Ah! Just as I thought. Someday, when you know us better and perhaps trust us the more, you will share your memories of the bardic schools. It is a tale that I would dearly love to hear. But for now, please accept this silver and my gratitude for your songs and tales this Christ's Mass. I can't remember a holiday since my husband died when I've enjoyed the evenings so much." Her eyes misted over, and the two men maintained a respectful silence.

"Silver," she continued after a pause, "I love silver. It's the color of the moon, is it not? So much more tranquil than gold, I always feel. The only problem with it is that it tarnishes so quickly. If you wear it and care for it, it keeps its soft sheen." Suddenly she was looking directly, but kindly, at Stephen. "But if you bury it in the ground, for instance, it becomes completely grey and dull within days."

Stephen blanched slightly, but he held her eyes and didn't look away. "I'm not sure what you mean, my lady. This good silver here," he indicated the bag she'd just given him, "won't be buried anywhere, I can assure you. My family and I

will live the more comfortably for your generosity."

Eadgyth clapped her hands with delight. "I'm so pleased to hear you say that. I'm always glad to hear that my gifts have gone to appreciative homes. Now, Stephen, indulge me, won't you? I have a story to tell you, and I would be very interested to hear your opinion of my storytelling abilities, talented as you are."

Stephen inclined his head obediently and settled back on his stool, but his eyes were guarded and wary. Eadgyth had him cornered, and he knew it. Gyrth wondered how she had solved the riddle of Samhain Eve and was fascinated to hear what she would say.

"Now," Eadgyth began, "this is a story, you understand, a work from my imagination, and it is at present a little like the skeleton you just mentioned. There are places where I would appreciate your advice on how to cover the bones." Stephen nodded and folded his arms, his head to one side as he concentrated.

"Once upon a time our country was terrorized by the Sea-Wolves, the men in longships who brought destruction and rapine to our shores. They were fierce and hated warriors, believing in the gods of the Northlands. They ravaged our shores here in Essex and caused much devastation. Good King Alfred had the courage to fight them, however, and won many famous victories, one of which was the Battle at Benfleet, not far from where you live, Stephen. Let us say that two local men managed to kill one of the Danes left over from the bat-

tle. Let us say that they betrayed him. Perhaps they had promised to leave him dead for his leader to find, so that he would be burned on the huge funeral pyre with his comrades and thus be ensured entry into Valhalla. But let us imagine that, instead, they betrayed his trust, took his body away, and buried it shamefully in a ditch. Perhaps his tortured spirit still wanders the place of his death, trying to find a way into heaven." Eadgyth paused, but Stephen still regarded her fixedly.

"Now, that was all a long time ago. No one has any sympathy for the Danes these days, even if their King Cnut is now our lawful ruler. But in those days they were rapacious invaders, and there was active, justifiable hatred. The story of what had happened at Benfleet passed into family history and then, perhaps because it was one of betrayal and not something to be particularly proud of, it ceased to be told at all. Over the years the Dane was forgotten.

"But quite recently something happened that again involved the Danes and the descendants of the men who had killed the Dane at Benfleet. I suspect it was something so unspeakably terrible that it sent normally gentle, sane men into a demonic frenzy. I think that the family murdered another Dane, probably in revenge for this horror perpetrated against them, leading the son of the family to believe that they might be haunted by the Dane's vengeful spirit. In order to prevent this, the father had taken the opportunity to placate both the

spirit of the recently murdered Dane and that of the Dane of Benfleet. Unfortunately he didn't have time to reassure his son about this before the skeleton was washed out onto the path by a storm, right at the feet of father, son, and a visitor to the brickfield."

Eadgyth stopped and folded her hands neatly in her lap. "What do you think of my story, Stephen? It's not quite complete in places, I fear. Perhaps you could suggest some explanations for the areas where there are gaps."

Stephen regarded her carefully for a few moments, Eadgyth meeting his gaze coolly. At last he shrugged.

"Your storytelling abilities show promise, lady, but as you say, the skeleton lacks flesh. I can see that Gyrth here has related to you the story I told around the fire on Samhain Eve. If I were continuing the story—and of course, you understand that I have no knowledge of the events that you describe, so I can only use my imagination—it would probably go something like this."

Eadgyth nodded gravely. "Of course I understand, Stephen. I am looking for guidance in the art of storytelling only."

"Well, my lady, if I were telling this story, I would say that you are quite correct that there were two Danes. The first one was killed by Ceolwulf and Edward after the Battle of Benfleet. His body was buried in the ditch beside the brickfields. In time, the whereabouts of the body became known to the storyteller only because he was a cu-



rious soul who pestered his elderly relatives for memories, hoping to turn them into the stories he loved. The story of the second Dane is a dark tale indeed, one of rape, murder, and revenge, and not, I think, fit for the ears of a gentle lady such as yourself."

"A good try, Stephen, but I'm sure that my gentle ears can perfectly withstand the truth, however gruesome, told by a master such as yourself." Eadgyth's tone was firm. Stephen acknowledged defeat.

"Well, my lady, if you insist. As you know, we're now at peace with the Danes. But there are many of us who can neither forgive nor forget what the past years have brought us. People think that now that Cnut is king everything is peaceful, but I tell you it's not. There are Danes wandering still, in small bands, raping, stealing, doing whatever they wish. They are lawless men and not answerable to Cnut or anyone else."

Eadgyth nodded.

"I have heard of such men. Wolf's-heads they are called. There are such men of our own, too, are there not? Criminals, escaped slaves, masterless men with nothing to lose."

Stephen paled but continued. "A few months ago, my daughter Emma, who was expecting her first child, and Edgar, her husband, were traveling by horse and cart from their home in Eastwood to my house in Southchurch. They had borrowed the horse from his master and were bringing Emma to us so her mother could care for her when her time came, her mother-in-law having died some years ago. When they

eventually arrived, it was on foot with a dreadful tale of being ambushed by Danes and their horse stolen. Emma was terrified and exhausted from the walk. Edgar had protected her as best he could, but what can a farmer do against such men?"

Stephen's voice, even-toned until that point, finally broke and the tears welled up. He swallowed. The silence in the room became intense, and Gyrth felt a cold chill on his spine.

"That night she went into labor. My wife said it was the shock. The babe was born dead." Stephen took a deep breath. "Emma was inconsolable. She wept and tore at herself with her nails. We had to bandage her hands to stop her harming herself. We took it in turns to sit with her. We gave her herbs to make her sleep and hoped that time would lessen her pain, but every time she woke, she kept making howling noises like an animal in a trap.

"It went on for days and it seemed there was nothing we could do. Then she suddenly appeared to grow calm, and we thought she was finally on the mend. But she was just biding her time. As soon as she was left alone, she disappeared." He fell silent, staring into the fire.

"Did you find her?" Gyrth asked after a suitable pause, although he already knew the answer.

"Yes, eventually, but it would have been better if we hadn't. That way we could have imagined that she was still alive somewhere, taken in by kindly folk, or drowned. As it was, we scoured the marshes and

the woods but found nothing. Then we realized that she might have just gone home, the way wounded animals do. That's where we found her. She'd been raped, strangled, and thrown on the midden."

Gyrth swallowed. "What did you do?"

"Ah! Well. That's the thing. William, Edgar, and myself left the house in white heat. We were looking for a Dane, any Dane. And we found one. On his own. We overpowered him, such was our fury, and dragged him to the same spot where they'd ambushed Emma and Edgar those few days before, and we killed him. He didn't understand, of course, not that it mattered. Afterwards, we brought him back home. We didn't want the others in his band knowing he was dead and taking revenge on the locals."

Eadgyth leaned forward, took Stephen's hand, and said softly, "Now I understand. Your, ah, professional advice on my story answers many questions in my mind, and I thank you for that. Never fear, I shan't be sharing your story with anyone else. Some pieces of advice should be kept between friends, I think."

Stephen bowed his head. "My family and I are indebted to you, lady."

"How did you know there were two Danes?" asked Gyrth, finally surfacing through the horror of the story.

"Well, first, from what you told me about what happened on the road, I realized that there *had* to be two Danes. William was terrified by the skeleton's appearance. He knew it was a Dane without even looking.

He was convinced it was going to do them immediate harm. If he had known about the old skeleton, he wouldn't have been frightened. Therefore, he was talking about something that had happened recently involving a Dane. Stephen had to reassure him that the skeleton had been there a long time and that it was harmless. The only explanation was that they were talking about two different Danes.

"Then there was the mystery of the old bones and the new silver armbands. How had they got there? Again, there was only one explanation that made sense. The original body had been uncovered recently and the silver put there. That probably accounts for the skeleton's being uncovered by the rain. Its resting place had been disturbed and not properly recovered. But why put silver *with* a body? It would be more usual to loot it *from* a body. The only explanation was that the silver had been put there to pay a debt to the man's spirit. Since the silver was Danish, it had to have come from another Dane."

She paused and looked at Stephen, eyebrows raised.

"You're right, of course," he said. "I decided that perhaps I could placate the restless spirit of the Benfleet Dane if I returned the silver that Ceolwulf and Edward had stolen from him. And yes, you're also right about the rain. Reburying him in that storm was a nightmare. As fast as I piled the earth back over him, the rain washed it off. It was as if he were determined to be found. I just hoped that no one would find him until the rain had stopped and

I could rebury him properly. But before that happened, he washed out right in front of William and Gyrth. William panicked. He thought it was the body of the Dane that we'd just killed coming back to haunt us. After all, it *was* Samhain! I hadn't had a chance to tell him what I'd done. I'd learned the lesson of the disposal of the first Dane's body. I made sure that the second one had a proper Danish funeral. No chance of *him* wandering!"

And Gyrth was now amazed as the Lady Eadgyth suddenly lay back in her chair and began to chuckle quietly. At last she said, "I think we should go down now. It's supptime, and I am looking forward to hearing the 'Battle of Maldon.' You are a very remarkable man, Stephen of Wakering. I am honored to do business with you and grateful for your professional advice. Be assured of a welcome here in my hall at any time."

She stood, and the two men rose. Stephen bowed solemnly, but as he straightened up, Gyrth could swear

that he saw the ghost of a smile. "Thank you, my lady. I am always at the command of a mistress so gracious and . . . perceptive," and he left to make his preparations downstairs.

Gyrth and Eadgyth stood by the fire in thoughtful silence.

"I understand how you worked out that there were two Danes and that there had been another recent killing. But where's the second Dane? What did Stephen mean when he said that he hadn't made the same mistake with the second one but had given him a proper Danish funeral? What did he do with the body?"

Eadgyth laughed and gave her arm to Gyrth, for him to accompany her downstairs.

"What's a proper Danish funeral, Gyrth?"

"A funeral pyre, my lady."

"And Stephen runs a brickfield, does he not? I should think the second Dane went into the kiln as fuel. That's probably why our pots were late on Samhain Eve."

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*Craig Perman Pictures*

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The winning entry for the October Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

FICTION

# THE MARTIN McKAIN AFFAIR

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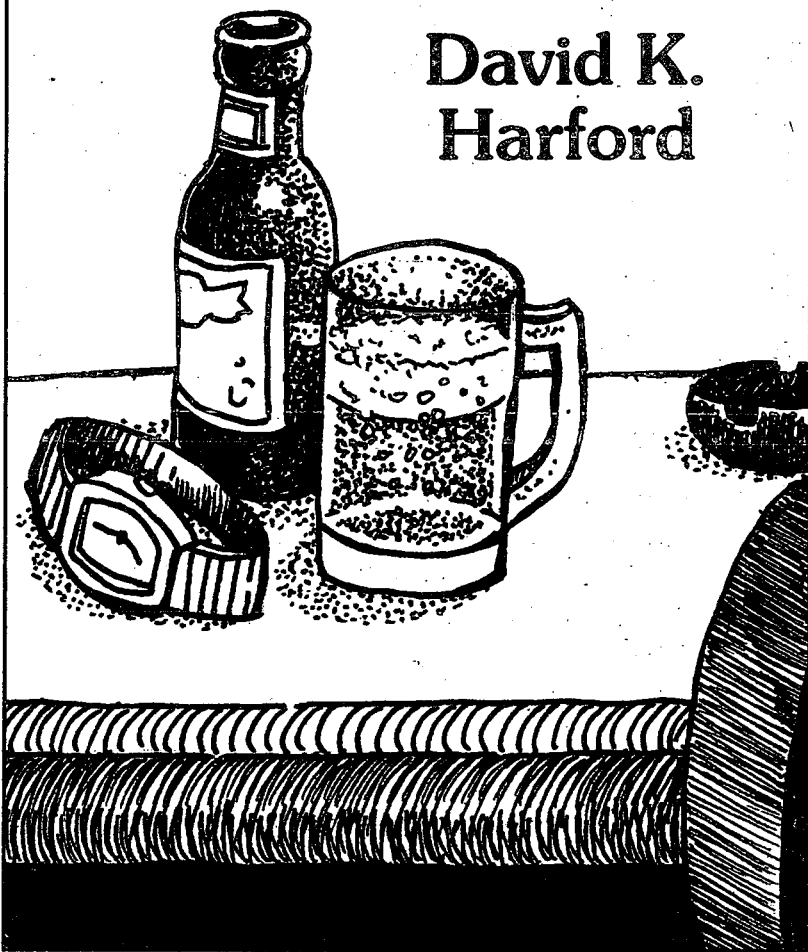


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*Martin McKain's Show & Tell*

Sitting around the bar of the Westline Inn a few days after Martin McKain put on his little Show & Tell, someone remarked that Martin couldn't have picked a worse day to do it.

Not that there's a good day to kill yourself, mind you. What the guy was referring to was all them gun control advocates holding their annual state conference in nearby Bradford the same day Martin McKain was parading around inside his house, in front of the window, pressing that .357 to his temple and yelling at the police to let him alone. Ranting and raving he was, calling out something about Cora Crandall, of all people, about how he was hurting and he had no reason to go on. Then he yelled for the police to let Robbie Sherwood come in.

Later, after Martin done what he done, the police came out carrying that .357, plus what looked like an AK-47 assault rifle, a 9 millimeter Uzi, and some other kind of military weapon that apparently Martin kept in his house. We didn't see ammo, but just the mention of those guns in the Bradford *Era*, the .357 and Martin taking himself out, well, that was enough ammo for those gun control advocates to prove their points—or to further them anyway—particularly when you consider that the main topic of their conference was "The Responsible Use of Firearms."

At the time Martin's Show & Tell was happening, Longstreet and me weren't anywhere near, so we did-

n't know a thing about it until it was almost over. No sir. About that time we were standing hip-deep in brackish swamp water trying to bust up the beaver dam them beavers built near Longstreet's house. The dam water was backing up Longstreet's septic system because it was flooding the leach field where the sewer water drains.

Longstreet was real irritated about them old flat-tailed water rats as you can imagine anyone might be who couldn't flush his toilets.

So we'd been working to bust the beaver dam open, to drive them beavers off Longstreet's property, when Longstreet's wife Mary came running across the field yelling to him about what Martin McKain was doing.

Most of the town's eighty people stood gathered in small groups outside Martin's house by the time we cut across the field at a near run.

Besides the townfolk, three Pennsylvania state police cars formed a barricade across the front of Martin's deteriorated little shack. State police investigator Anderson leaned hunched over a cruiser's hood, cell phone in his hand. At the same time he was listening and nodding to whatever Robbie Sherwood was telling him.

Pacing nearby, looking more anxious and confused than Martin McKain was even, was Bob Crandall, Cora Crandall's no good ex.

"Get in here, Robbie," Martin called through the smaller of two windows, the pistol still pressed to his temple. "I need to talk with you, man."

"What brought this on?" Long-



street asked one of the older folks who'd gathered there.

The guy just shook his head slowly, mumbling something about the younger generation and the way the world is today.

Longstreet elbowed me to take notice as Robbie Sherwood removed the expensive Rolex watch he was so proud of and slipped it into his sport coat pocket as he headed for McKain's house, calling, "I'm coming in, Marty. It's me, Robbie. Now, don't do anything stupid. No one's going to hurt you. We'll just talk."

It didn't seem very long that Robbie was in there, maybe ten, fifteen minutes, when suddenly there was a deafening explosion of the .357 going off. Almost like he was blown out of the house by the gun blast, Robbie Sherwood came staggering out the door backwards, the blood of his friend splattered all up and down the front of him, blood all over his hands.

Dazed, pale, and still wobbly, Sherwood stuck his arms, sport coat sleeves and all, deep into a full rain barrel sitting alongside the house. After rinsing the blood from his hands, he rubbed cool rainwater all over his face, as if that were going to cool the heat I imagined was flushing his face red, then white hot.

A few moments later investigator Anderson came out toting that AK-47, looking it over real close, real curious about it. He was carrying that .357 in a plastic bag, a newspaper photographer from Bradford snapping pictures all the while.

Folks began dispersing, whispering to each other, and just like that,

Martin McKain's showtime on this earth was over.

A couple of days passed, and the death of Martin McKain had settled; the accidental death of Cora Crandall a few weeks before McKain's had also settled, and our small mountain hamlet of Westline was getting back to normal—well, as normal as you can get considering we were short two people.

Quite a collection of folks, mostly local folks, sat around the backwoods bar besides me, Longstreet, and Mary. We had just finished our burgers and pork barbecue sandwiches. Robbie Sherwood was there drinking his top shelf scotch and puffing on a cigar, hoping to make himself appear richer than we figured he was. Not exactly from Westline, he'd been born poor in this area, but he left right after high school and established some kind of computer company in New York City. He'd been back in our area for a couple of years, running his company from nearby Bradford, hiring Martin McKain to do his delivering and small work, and doing fairly well with the business.

Duke Day was there. He must have found some money because he was slouched in the corner near the window carefully counting out change for a draft, spit running down his chin the way it usually did. Duke Day rarely had money except after he sold the aluminum cans he picked up along the highway. That was his only source of income except for SSI.

A stranger, a black-haired dude in a red flannel shirt, stood drink in

hand across the room from us near the TV. But he was close enough, he'd have no problem hearing our conversation if he had half a mind to listen in. And I thought he did.

Smitty, Feldman, and Dempsey in his arm cast stood off to the side. And Bob Crandall was there, too, scowling as usual, looking like he was not too pleased about things, casting angry glances across the U-shaped bar at Robbie Sherwood dressed to the nines.

The bar conversation went first to those gun control folks, who by that time were winding down their state convention. It was then that someone remarked on Martin McKain's timing in doing himself in.

Northwestern Pennsylvania is gun country. Someone once said there are probably more guns in houses here than table lamps. Here a magazine isn't necessarily something you read; more often it's something you jam into a rifle. So those convention people sure picked a funny place to hold their meeting to talk about banning guns.

Not our guns.

"The Brady Bunch all packed up and gone?" Smitty asked.

Most of us nodded. They were gone or going.

"Wonder what they decided?"

"That banning guns is the answer to city crime," Longstreet said. "Never mind that we're country. Never mind decaying morals and family values, unemployment, poverty, drugs, mental illness. They don't cause crime. People don't cause crime. Guns do. It's easier for them to think that. 'Course, they'd already decided that when they got

here. They weren't here to learn. They were here to lecture us and limit us."

His voice was heavy with sarcasm. A couple of people snickered derisively.

For many in the area there was no middle ground about this. No compromise. Them and us. No give and take.

I was thinking about all this—how in our minds the government is getting bigger and controlling more and more of our lives in an effort to control a few out-of-control and please a few *in* control, all of it meant to fine-tune the bulk of us, when Bob Crandall demanded of Robbie Sherwood, "What the hell was Martin saying about Cora? He have a thing going with my ex?"

We all turned toward Sherwood. He'd be the man to know, being Martin McKain's best friend and boss. It was something I think we all wanted to know more about. Martin McKain had never dated Cora Crandall, or anybody else that we knew of, but given his ranting and raving, Cora sure seemed to have been dead center in his mind that day.

Let me say this first: the late Cora Crandall was a young budding artist, Westline's only artist, our own little artist-in-residence, and we all loved her dearly. She sketched a lot of wildlife pictures, scenes she snapped with the camera and telephoto lens she always carried with her as she pedaled her mountain bike around town, around the area, that old, familiar green knapsack strapped to her back. Sometimes she'd keep a photo she

took, enlarge it in her own dark-room, and build a nice looking frame for it. She told me once that some shots she took—they were damned nice nature shots—some things, she said, you just can't improve on, so she left them as photos. Other photos she'd use as a guide to do her little pen and ink sketches. Lately, the last few years, she'd been getting a reputation and was invited to big art shows like one up near Buffalo and one down at State College near Penn State. She didn't own a car, but somehow she always managed to get to those shows to display her paintings and photos, and she was beginning to make a living off all the artsy stuff she was doing.

But then they found her dead.

Late in the evening a fisherman found her body floating in the Kinzua Creek, which snakes through Westline and the Allegheny National Forest. There was Cora Crandall in that water, her clothing snagged on the dead limbs of a white pine fallen across the creek, her body bobbing in the low, warm current, the ever-present camera and telephoto lens strapped around her neck.

She fell. That was the official report. She was apparently climbing down a treacherous rocky ledge alongside a bridge (perhaps, someone speculated, to take a picture of something under the bridge) and slipped on the rocks, cracked her head a good one, and drowned floating unconscious downstream.

All of us, of course, were saddened by her death. She was the only artist we knew, and she was about as gentle (and maybe as innocent) as some of the wildlife she photo-

graphed. But as sad as we were, none of us, I think, took Cora Crandall's death as hard as Martin McKain seemed to have done.

Robbie Sherwood ran his hands through his neatly trimmed hair and positioned his elbow on the bar, turning his wrist slowly in such a way that we'd all get a good look at that twenty-five hundred dollar Rolex watch. He thought a moment, dragging on his cigar, studying Bob Crandall over the lip of his scotch glass, then said, "Truth is, Crandall, that's the first time I ever heard him mention her. He'd been down about a lot of things."

Bob Crandall glared at Sherwood like he was hearing but wasn't believing anything Sherwood said. "You telling me Martin McKain in the last moments of his life is yelling out about my ex and he hasn't got anything going with her? Get real, Sherwood."

Sherwood's lips curled into a vicious grin. "Think what you want, Crandall," he said evenly and harshly. "You asked. I told you. And don't you tell me to get real."

There always had been bad feelings between those two, and it seemed like the blood in the veins of both men was reaching a boiling point. Hoping to cool it, I told Bob Crandall, "Well, it's possible for a man to keep a secret light on for someone he cares for, but for any number of reasons, he's afraid to tell anyone about it, even his best friend—and especially the person the light's on for."

"What the hell you care for, anyway?" Sherwood said to Crandall, challenging him, it sounded to me,

even though that might not have been a good idea. Crandall, bulky and muscular from loading and unloading freight all his life, looked like he was in a fighting mood. But Sherwood wasn't one to walk away from a fight either, so we had two bull elks locking horns right there in the bar. "She hadn't had anything to do with you for several years. And we all know why."

I'd always liked Robbie Sherwood. I like a man who can rise up against the odds; a man who can shrug off his past, unafraid to venture forward and succeed, even if he did tend to be a bit pretentious. Robbie was aggressive, no doubt, but what he said about Bob Crandall and Cora was true as well as aggressive.

About the best way to describe Bob Crandall was he was an s.o.b. Period.

Cora and Bob Crandall married young, too young, before either of them knew what they wanted to do and to be, before they really knew themselves or each other. Crandall drove eighteen wheelers across country, mostly up and down the East Coast, so he was gone most of the time. He worked for a trucking firm out of New York State somewhere, and at one time or another he'd hauled just about everything imaginable. But he was jealous, almost paranoid, about his wife when he was gone; always accusing her of sleeping with every Tom, Dick, and Harry who showed any interest in her budding art career. Then Bob Crandall began thumping on Cora.

Yet, in spite of the beatings, she stayed with him, always believing, I suppose, that someday soon the

beatings would stop. But they just got worse. Seeing her all bruised up we told her to call the police. Longstreet's wife pleaded with her to do that, offered to go to the police with her. But Cora was still naive, wanting things to be different—wanting to love him and be loved—but afraid to do anything that might effect a change. Strong emotions like love and fear mix with common sense in a person about as well as oil mixes with water.

The marriage and the beatings probably would have continued had not one day Cora Crandall's mother popped in unexpectedly from California, the day after Crandall had gone on one of his drunken, jealous rampages. Cora's mother saw what was going on. She sat her down, as any mother would, and told her point-blank, "Get rid of him. Get out of here. He'll kill you one day."

It took some convincing, and it took old mom standing behind her, but Cora finally pressed charges against Bob Crandall, got a protection-from-abuse order from the county judge, who ordered Crandall to have no contact with his wife for any reason, and moved out of Bradford away from her husband to Westline, into a medium sized camp some guy didn't use and wanted to rent out. Up until then she'd just more or less popped in and out of town to take her pictures.

Over the next few years, by herself and free of her husband, her art took off.

Sometimes late at night we might see Crandall driving by her place in his white pickup, checking up on

her we suspected, seeing who was sleeping there, even though there never was anybody. But for the most part, I have to admit, Bob Crandall stayed away; not liking it, mind you, but obeying that court order.

Now Sherwood had reopened that wound in Bob Crandall and any moment, I expected, they'd be taking it out to the parking lot.

"You got a problem with that?" Sherwood said. "If so, we can do it and do it now. You can try beating on me." He slid off the barstool and slipped his watch off his wrist, handing it to Longstreet to hold.

Crandall rose and faced him.

Then Mary added her voice. She glanced sideways at Bob Crandall and leaned against Longstreet's shoulder as if for protection. "Maybe you know it. Maybe you don't," she said to Crandall, "but Cora's mom asked me to gather all her things, things I thought a daughter might want a mother to have, and ship them to her in California. I'm to sell everything else. I've seen no signs of Cora and Martin McKain together. None at all. It might be hard for you to understand, Crandall, but maybe Martin McKain just felt bad about what happened to her. We all did. Maybe he had a heart. You know what that is? But whatever problems Martin may have had, and probably none of us will ever know, I haven't seen any evidence Cora was part of them."

Her intervention seemed to take the heat out of Sherwood and Crandall's exchange.

She leaned harder against Longstreet. "That reminds me," she said to her husband, "there are some un-

developed rolls of film in her desk. Should I get them developed and send them to her mom, you think?"

Longstreet nodded. He was studying Sherwood's expensive watch, turning the heavy thing in his hands. "I've been meaning to ask you, Robbie," he said. "What was going through your mind when you went into that house to talk with McKain?"

Without hesitation Sherwood said, "I figured if he didn't give me that pistol I was going to try and wrestle him down and take it. I knew I could get close enough—or so I thought—and I knew it'd be a tussle. But, he, ah, he just did it, man, just as I was nearing him; he just pulled the trigger. Nothing I could do to stop him. I grabbed his head hoping to stop the bleeding, but—"

His voice trailed off.

The folks around the bar sat quietly as Robbie Sherwood described what went on in McKain's house.

Finally Longstreet held Sherwood's Rolex up and said, "I've got a twenty-four dollar Timex that keeps time as good as this, but this is a nice watch. I can see why you wouldn't want it broken." He reached down to spread open the side pocket of Sherwood's sport coat and dropped the watch in it. "How's your computer business doing?"

Keeping one eye on Crandall, Sherwood took his watch out of his pocket and laid it on the bar.

"Good. Excellent actually. I'll tell you the secret to successful businesses: find something that people feel they've just got to have, provide them with it, and you'll be rich soon."

Longstreet just nodded. His logging business was successful enough and hard work was his philosophy about success. He leaned across Mary and said to me, "Let's go see how those beavers are doing."

As I downed my beer, I noticed Duke Day pull a bunch more change from his pocket and count out nickels, dimes, and pennies for another beer. He must have found a mother lode of aluminum cans somewhere, I thought.

I also saw the stranger in the red flannel shirt throw down the rest of his drink and stroll, almost unnoticed, out the front door to the parking lot, where he climbed into a light-colored pickup.

Over the next few days there wasn't much more discussion about Martin McKain or Cora Crandall; that is, not until someone walloped Mary up alongside the head with a hunk of two by four and laid her out cold in Cora Crandall's home.

Then things really got discussed.

## II

### *Mary Gets a Headache*

"This sucks pond water," Longstreet said, disgusted, reaching elbow-deep for a handful of sticks and a soupy mess of mud and wet, decayed leaves.

Even though I was soaked and uncomfortable, I had to smile. The phrase he chose was apt.

We were knee-deep in smelly muck and water removing the beaver dam again—for the fourth time. Each time we'd tear the dam apart them beavers rebuilt it stronger. "Busy as a beaver," I said.

"I'll say they've been busy. You'd think they'd get irritated and disgusted and leave. But oh no. They are largely nocturnal, you know, and every time they wake up and see where we broke open their dam, they just get all the more excited about that."

Beavers all around the area had become a problem. "I'm going to end up shooting them," he said.

He would, too.

"Hate to do it, but I can't drive them out by busting up their dam. And if I live-trap them, where am I going to put them? I called the game commission. It used to be beavers, beaver dams, and beaver huts were sacred. Man, you didn't dare touch them. Stiff fine if you did. Now they just tell you to go ahead and shoot them." Longstreet reached down and removed some large, chewed poplar branches. He had to yank on them hard because they were woven in tight with mud and other branches.

We had the animal rights people to thank for the overpopulation of beavers in the four county area.

"Somewhere in some city," Longstreet said, pulling out a large branch, "someone is smug and happy he saved a beaver today."

I raised up to take a kink out of my back and looked across the large pond that had once been part of the yard. When it rained real hard, the beaver pond water backed up almost to Longstreet's house.

Beavers are rodents, rats with tails that look like they've been flattened by an eighteen wheeler. They mate for life, have babies every year, and are hellish workers; left un-



checked their numbers soon swell, like rats. They have natural enemies—the fox, coyote, bobcat—but inside their pond and inside their huts, they're relatively safe.

Man was their enemy for a long time and their numbers were kept manageable—that is, until folks started protesting about coats, gloves, and hats made from the beaver's pelt. Then suddenly the price a trapper could fetch for a beaver hide dropped, dropped so low it wasn't worth it to trap them, skin them, and prepare the hides for market. Consequently, trappers trapped less and the beavers went on breeding, their numbers increasing each year.

It boiled down to a plain simple truth: for every action, there's a reaction, and it was like Longstreet said: somewhere someone was real proud of the fact that he'd saved a beaver. Of course, that person didn't have to put up with the increasing number of dams we were seeing. He didn't have to see the damaging reaction to his action: us being up to our you-know-what in beavers and some folks unable to flush their toilets. All he knew was that he'd saved a beaver.

"These are bank beavers." Longstreet cleared more mud, leaves, sticks chewed of their bark, and whatever else them beavers could find to stuff in their dam. "They're older beavers kicked out of younger colonies. They—"

I looked up when he stopped mid-sentence and watched what he was watching—Mary crossing the field, walking with someone. As they got closer we saw the other person was

Sally McKain, Martin McKain's mom.

"Ah, Jesus," Longstreet sighed heavily. "This ain't going to be fun. I'll bet she's all busted up over Martin."

It had been nearly a week since Martin put that gun to his head.

Mary and Mrs. McKain stood on the edge of the pond. The water was beginning to drain from where we'd busted the dam open, but it would take a while because of the thousands and thousands of gallons backed up. We waded to the grassy bank and removed our wet tennis shoes.

Sally McKain looked as frail as I'd ever seen her, like a gaunt, sickly tree stripped of leaves and bark, continually whipped by the winds. She'd lived in Westline most of her life and was Longstreet's mom's best friend when his parents were alive. After her husband died and her heart gave out, Sally McKain turned her property over to her only son and moved into nearby Kane, into a retirement home, so she could be closer to the Kane hospital in case she needed emergency treatment.

"Got beavers, I see," Mrs. McKain said casually, making small talk.

"Can't get rid of them," Longstreet said. "Probably end up shooting them."

Her gaze traveled up and down Longstreet softly, but her eyes were sad. "You've done good," she said. "Haven't seen you in a while to talk with you, but Martin mentioned seeing you now and again. You look just like your daddy. Your mama would be proud. You've grown into a fine young man, take good care of

the property, work hard, I imagine, and have a lovely wife."

Mary blushed, glanced quickly at Longstreet, then up at the sky.

"Your mama and I used to sit out here summer nights," Mrs. McKain said, letting her sweeping gaze across the property remember days past for her. "We had them old wooden lawn chairs your daddy built, and we'd sit here near sunset, drink coffee, and talk about things we'd done and would like to do with you kids. Doesn't seem so long ago." She paused a bit. "I saw you at the funeral. Thanks for coming and for the flowers."

Nervously she twisted her purse strap around her fingers.

Standing behind Sally McKain Mary mouthed silently, "Talk to her" to her husband. Then she said aloud, "I'm going to do some more sorting in a little bit. When you guys are done here, I'll have some boxes to load. I'll call when I'm ready." She motioned with her hands again, telling Longstreet to say something to the grieving woman.

"I've still got them chairs up in the attic," Longstreet said. More small talk.

"Do you now." The purse strap was twisted so tight around her fingers the skin was white.

They were both running out of talk, and the tension from things not said was as thick as the humidity.

"You're welcome for the flowers," he said finally. "We, Martin and me, we had some good times growing up. 'Course lately, the last few years, we were too busy to see much of each other. We kind of drifted apart.

He was a good man, though. The funeral was nice."

"He still went to church nearly every Sunday," she said.

Mary headed slowly across the lawn, her head down, her hands jammed in her jeans pockets.

"A mother's got to know, you know," Sally McKain whispered.

They'd finally gotten to it.

"I suppose that's true."

"A mother's got to know why her son would do something like that. It's the not knowing *why* that torments me so. I've got to close it, close it out. It's not like Loretta. I know most of the why's with her. Not all of them, but I know what happened. I thought maybe you, as his childhood friend, still living here and all, that maybe, oh, just maybe, you might know something that would help me understand why he'd do what he done. Maybe you heard something."

Loretta was Mrs. McKain's only daughter; dead of cancer, too young, quite a few years ago. Like I say, Mrs. McKain had had her share of being whipped by those stinging, hollow winds life sends at you, seemingly for no reason and most times coming out of nowhere, sometimes whipping you from all directions all at once.

"Well," Longstreet told her, "we really didn't have time together lately. He was a little mixed up, I guess. Robbie Sherwood said he'd been down about some things. That's the best I can tell you."

"Robbie Sherwood. Robbie Sherwood. Ha. I wish my boy'd never got mixed up with him. Robbie Sherwood." Her voice grew rock hard.

"Always strutting around in them fancy clothes, driving fancy cars, talking fancy business stuff, city stuff. What does Robbie Sherwood know about folks? Martin may have been worried lately about something; he may have been edgy. But down? Sad? Sad enough to do what he did? What's Robbie Sherwood know? I raised my boy. From these loins, through dirty diapers and tears I raised him." Her voice began to rise. "Through laughter and heartache I raised him; through punishment and praise I raised him. And raised him good. What's Robbie Sherwood know about my son. Sad? Ha. My boy wasn't sad. Scared was more like it."

There seemed to be no sense pointing out that we'd all watched Martin's little show and someone marching around with a pistol to his head, well, he usually isn't very happy about things right then. There's something about a child being sad that can make a mother feel she's failed somewhere, and I suppose that's what Mrs. McKain was trying to avoid thinking—that Martin was depressed for any number of reasons and that she'd somehow failed him.

"He didn't even work for Robbie Sherwood no more. Got smart and quit him," she said smugly.

"He did?" Longstreet couldn't contain his surprise. "When?"

"I'm not really too sure when he quit. He just told me one day a week or so before—well—before what happened, that he'd quit Sherwood. He never said why, though. Said he didn't even want to talk to him no more."

"You said you thought he was scared. Scared of what?" Longstreet asked.

"Don't know. Never would say that either. He'd come up for dinner a couple times a week, but he never spoke about what was on his mind. But I could tell. I'm his mother. I'd seen him scared before, like when you kids busted into that camp, drank their whisky, and threw up, and the cops caught you because you were all too sick to run. He was scared then, I know. This was like that, only worse."

"He ever mention a girl named Cora Crandall?" Longstreet asked, rising and digging his toes into the warm, grassy ground, holding his wet tennies in one hand.

Mrs. McKain blanched, and she twitched as if she'd been pinched hard. "Why'd you ask about her?"

"Martin may have been carrying a torch for her, is all. She drowned a few weeks ago; maybe that—"

"I know all about the drowning," Mrs. McKain said. "Martin cut out all the clips from all the newspapers in the area that had stories about it. He was saving them for some reason. He knew her. Sure. He'd bought a couple of her drawings, I guess, but he never mentioned about carrying no torch, as you say, for her. He never brought her up for dinner. Not once."

"Well, that's all I've heard about it. I'd suggest you talk to Robbie, if you want to know more, 'cause he'd know, Mrs. McKain. Whether you like Robbie or not, he'd know better than me. He was there."

"I never liked Robbie Sherwood and I never liked his father, the old

bootlegging son of a bitch. His mother was nothing but a little tramp. Everyone knew that. Poor they were but not so poor they couldn't go to the gin mill regularly. No, I'm not asking Robbie Sherwood nothing. I won't have Robbie Sherwood tell me my boy was sad." She suddenly spun around and left.

Mrs. McKain was bitter at the whole world, it seemed.

"Mrs. McKain?" Longstreet called, half apologetically.

"I won't," she said and kept walking, hunched. "I'd rather not know than lower myself to ask *him*."

I believe she was crying.

After she was out of sight Longstreet frowned at the mountains all around us, mountains that formed the Kinzua Valley at the bottom of which Westline had been built. He sucked in a lungful of mountain air and kicked the ground a good lick with his bare foot.

"Damn," he said. "There's a lot of things around here lately that suck pond water."

Night was closing in. We lounged on Longstreet's porch, bare feet up on the railing, enjoying the warm, summer evening drinking beers. Our shoes were drying out, and we had quite a collection of empty beer cans lined up on the porch railing.

"If she don't call pretty soon," Longstreet said, "we'll be too drunk to move ourselves, let alone boxes."

It had been a couple of hours since we last saw Mary, but there was no telling when she'd actually gotten started at Cora Crandall's. Longstreet went in to call Cora's number.

"No answer," he told me, two full

cans of beer in his hands. "We'll drink these and walk over."

We sipped the beer and discussed Sally McKain and Martin McKain.

"Funny," Longstreet said, "that Sherwood didn't mention Martin quitting. I wonder why he quit. Jobs aren't all that plentiful here."

"Don't get me wrong," I answered. "I like him, like him a lot, but Robbie can be a jerk sometimes; maybe that's why. And maybe Robbie was embarrassed about his right-hand man and best friend quitting. Doesn't speak well for him as a boss. But it does fit with Martin's depression. I mean, when a guy is that down, he doesn't feel like doing anything, taking care of himself, working, eating properly. He loses interest in his friends. Those all can be signs of depression. Suicide is the ultimate, twisted sign that says, I've Finally Arrived."

"But what would he have been so depressed about?"

"Who knows."

"Cora Crandall? Did he love her that much, you think?"

"You have to understand," I said. "If he's already depressed and let's say he just kind of likes Cora, see, then something happens to her, hell, that could be the last straw for him. What I'm saying is, her death could have become just a final reason to support his belief that all life is worthless. That's how they feel, you know, when people do things like that, when they're depressed and confused. It's the deepest, darkest dungeon to be lost in, depression is. And some people in there see only one exit out for themselves."

"Then why didn't he just do it?"

Why call out for Robbie Sherwood when they weren't even speaking to one another? And while I'm thinking about it, I wonder who called the cops."

Early stars began appearing on the horizon as the sun dimmed.

"What would he have been scared about?" Longstreet continued, talking mostly to himself.

"Man, we'll never know. Maybe he was carrying on with Cora, and he feared old Bob Crandall would catch them. I don't know. Maybe Bob Crandall *did* catch them. It really doesn't matter any more."

Longstreet stood. "It matters to Mrs. McKain."

I knew then she'd really gotten to him.

The light-colored pickup damned near run us over as it whipped around a corner, sliding in the loose gravel. The driver gunned it good, and the truck took off fishtailing down the macadam road leading out of Westline.

We were too busy jumping out of the way to get a good look at the truck or driver. On top of that, it was nearly dark. We were walking from Longstreet's and were almost to Cora Crandall's, to see how Mary was coming along, when the vehicle about run us down.

"Stupid s.o.b.," Longstreet said, brushing himself off. He'd dived into a drainage ditch to avoid getting sideswiped. "Who *was* that? We've got kids playing in the streets around here."

"Someone who thinks he's the only one on the road."

"I thought at first it was Cran-

dall," Longstreet said. "His truck's about that color."

"A lot of trucks are about that color," I said. "Yours is, too."

Mary's car was parked in front of Cora Crandall's place. An upstairs light was on, but we couldn't see anyone moving around.

Once upstairs, blood was the first thing we saw, though.

Blood on the floor, blood spattered on a hunk of wood lying next to Mary, who was just then sitting up, blood running down and matting on her blonde hair.

Longstreet rushed to her and helped her sit on the bed. He held her face in his large hands and studied her dazed eyes. He spun around to me, fire and anger in his eyes. "Take Mary's car and try to catch that pickup. Try to find it. *Now*. Move. I'll call Smitty. He's an EMT."

I moved.

Hitting eighty on the Westline Road, I caught up with it, but I didn't need to follow it. I knew where it was going. I could see that it was Bob Crandall driving the truck and he was speeding towards his home.

By the time I got back Mary's head was cleaned of blood, and she was holding Longstreet's T-shirt over the bad bump the two by four had given her. Smitty was there, muscling Longstreet out of the way so he could check Mary's wound.

"I don't know, honey," she was whispering. "I just walked in and saw the desk drawer was open, and then the lights went out. I . . . the film."

She raised her head too quickly and winced in pain. "See if those rolls of film are there."

There were no rolls of film in the drawer.

When I told Longstreet that it was Bob Crandall in the truck that had sped out of town so quickly, he turned stone-white, saying nothing although his lips were quivering with anger, and then suddenly he jumped up and took the stairs down in four leaps. "Take care of her, Smitty. You coming?" he yelled to me in the next breath as he yanked open the door of Mary's car.

Longstreet knocked on Bob Crandall's front door about the way I'd expected him to. He raised his foot and slammed it so hard the frame splintered and the door flew open. Before Bob Crandall could rise from where he was sitting, Longstreet was on him and had him backed up against the wall, grabbed by the neck and lifted so high the big truck driver's feet were nearly off the floor.

Rolls of film lay on his coffee table.

"I didn't do nothing to Mary," Crandall said before Longstreet even got the question asked. "She was lying there when I got there. Honest, she—I got out of there when I saw you two coming. I didn't want you to think I had anything to do with it."

"What's so important about this film, Crandall?" Longstreet lowered the big guy so he could stand flat-footed, but he still kept him pinned against the wall by his neck.

"I don't know—"

Longstreet squeezed Crandall's neck so hard Crandall began to change color.

"There may be some things on there I don't want no one to see," he

whispered through pinched-off vocal cords. "I—"

Longstreet released him, but when he turned, I could see the fire was still glowing in his eyes. He scooped up the film, stuffed it into his pocket, and then in one sudden, almost graceful move, he spun and landed one beauty of a full-fisted punch squarely on Crandall's nose. Blood spurted from Crandall's face, and the bones I heard breaking were not from Longstreet's fist.

Crandall sank to the floor holding his face, blood pouring through his fingers, while Longstreet strode out the door. I followed.

"What'd you hit him for?" I asked. "He said he didn't clobber Mary. I believe him. Man, we break into his place and assault him. You looking to talk with Anderson?"

"He won't say anything. I've got these." Longstreet held up the film. "And I don't know if he smacked Mary with that board or not. So why did I hit him? Because he didn't *help* her, that's why. He just *left* her lying there bleeding." He slammed the car door shut.

### III

#### *Tracking*

The afternoon sun hit us square in the face as Longstreet, me, and Mary (who wore a bandage over the shaved, stitched part of her head where she'd taken that hit) sat on the wooden front steps of the West-line Inn the next day. We'd gotten the film developed at the one hour photo shop in Bradford and were leafing through the prints.

I think we were more stunned



than anything else by what the photos showed.

"Can you believe what you're seeing?" Mary asked incredulously.

"No wonder Bob wanted these. He would surely go to jail and maybe even lose his license over these. Disobeying that court order wouldn't sit well with the judge."

Over-the-road semi drivers must have a commercial driver's license to haul. And there were plenty of restrictions on them, too. But what put Bob Crandall in a difficult position was what the county judge had told him the day the protection-from-abuse order was issued.

"I can't believe she could have been that dumb," Mary said. "God. After all her mother and I did to support her."

What we saw in the prints explained how Cora Crandall was able to get to those out-of-town art shows. She was sneaking around with her ex; Crandall and Cora were plainly pictured in many of the shots taken at what appeared to be an art show somewhere. In a couple of photos, taken by God-knows-who, they looked lovey-dovey standing next to his truck.

"Hey, it happens," I said. "Happens all the time."

What the judge specifically told Crandall was that if he came before him again in any matter related to the protection order he was not only going to throw him in jail, whereby he would not be working for a very long time, he was going to see what he could do to have his CDL license revoked. The county judge was known to have a seething disdain for spousal abuse.

All this explained why Bob Crandall might not have wanted anyone to see the pictures.

When I raised my head, I noticed two things immediately across the empty parking lot. I saw that dark-haired guy who'd been standing behind us in the inn a few days before. He was driving his light-colored pickup slowly with the window rolled down, and he was staring intently at the three of us sitting there going over those photos. My first impression was that the guy was ogling Mary's shapely, nicely tanned legs, but I realized his tongue wasn't hanging out and he was actually scrutinizing all of us.

"Who is that guy?" I asked Longstreet.

Longstreet looked up just as the guy rolled up his window and picked up speed, heading out of town.

"Don't know. Some flatlander, I guess."

The other thing I saw was Duke Day. "You think those pictures are unbelievable. Look at what Duke Day's riding."

Coming towards us was Duke Day perched atop Cora Crandall's mountain bike.

The bike was easy enough to identify because of the pink, heavy knit bag attached to the handlebars that Cora had used as a bicycle basket.

"Duke, my good man," Longstreet called. "Get over here."

Duke came.

"Nice looking bike, Duke. Where'd you get it?"

"Found it. Finders keepers, losers weepers," he said.

"That looks like Cora's bike. Is it, Duke?"

"It's mine," he pouted, like the little child the grown man was. "She's dead. It's mine now."

"It's still hers," Mary said firmly.

Like I did, Longstreet must have noticed the bulge in the knit basket on the handlebars because he said, "What do you have in the basket, Duke?"

Duke looked at him suspiciously.

"Hey," Longstreet said, "I might want to give you some money for what's in the basket and if you'll tell us just where you got that bike."

Duke's eyes always shone when money was brought up.

There'd been no mention of Cora's bike in anything involving her death. It wasn't at the bridge where she was supposed to have fallen in, and the bridge was near enough to town that everyone figured she'd walked to it. But as I thought about it, I didn't recall Mary's mentioning the bike in the inventory.

Duke pulled several items from the basket. One was a copy of the *Bradford Era*. A quick look showed the paper was dated the day Cora was found in the creek. There was also her mail: a Publishers Clearing House Sweepstakes envelope announcing her a winner in Step Two, a bill, a thick photo magazine. Next, Duke produced an empty coin purse from the basket, and I knew then where he'd gotten all that change I'd seen him spending a few days before. He also pulled out of the basket an empty box that had held a roll of twenty-four exposure film. Last and more remarkable, he produced a roll of shot but undeveloped twelve-exposure 35mm film without its box.

Longstreet stared at the roll of film, then reached into his wallet and pulled out a ten dollar bill. Immediately Duke Day reached for it, but Longstreet pulled it away. "Where'd you get the bike?" he said.

Duke, looking at the ten spot, said, "Out at Windy Run. It was leaning against that big dead tree along the road right at the start of Windy Run. So I took it." He reached again for the ten. "Finders keep—"

"I know, I know," Longstreet drew the ten back farther. "When did you find it?"

"Last week sometime. I was picking up cans along the road."

"And these things were in this basket?"

Duke Day nodded.

Windy Run, an area we weren't all that familiar with, was just on the edge of the Allegheny National Forest about ten miles from Westline. To the left, climbing the hill that was Windy Run, was private land; to the right the ANF began; so Windy Run acted as a border between private and federal land.

"I'll tell you what," Longstreet was saying to Duke Day, "I'll give you this ten for the paper, the mail, that empty box, and that roll of film. You can keep the coin purse." He held the ten out to Duke, who snatched it up and handed Longstreet the items he'd just bought.

Duke turned to leave, but Longstreet stopped him again.

"We have a problem, Duke." I could tell by the glint in his eyes that Longstreet was up to mischief. "The bike isn't yours."

"I *found* it. It is mine. Finders keepers, losers weepers."

"The police won't see it that way. Detective Anderson will be grilling you hard. They see you on that bike, they're going to say you stole it. Then you'll go to jail and eat bread and water for maybe five years, Duke. That's a long time."

"Really?" Dread clouded his face. "Really."

Longstreet rubbed his chin, letting the fear settle in on Duke Day. "But I'll tell you what we can do. It just so happens Mary here has permission to dispose of Cora's property." He glanced over and winked at his wife. "What do you think, honey. It would be pretty expensive to ship that bike to Cora's mom."

"Oh, very," Mary said, picking up with Longstreet but probably not knowing exactly where he was going. I know I didn't know. "Probably cost a hundred dollars to ship it out there," Mary continued.

"So, you think we should sell it?"

Duke Day's eyes darted back and forth between Mary and Longstreet as each spoke.

"Cora's mom won't want it. Yes. I think we should sell it."

"How much?" Duke Day asked.

"How about ten dollars? You got ten dollars?" Longstreet asked, rubbing his chin more.

"Sure. Sure." He dug in his pocket and pulled out the ten spot Longstreet had just given him. "Here."

"Then the bike's yours, Duke. You bought it fair and square." Longstreet stuffed the ten back into his wallet. "Stop over tomorrow and Mary will give you an official receipt."

Happy, Duke pedaled off on his newly purchased bike.

Mary snatched the roll of film from Longstreet and offered to have it developed while she was in Bradford picking up her prescription. It was a good thing she left with it when she did or we might never have found out what was going on.

She'd been gone only a few minutes and Longstreet and I were puzzling over the items Duke Day had just given us. We were able to surmise a few things easily. Cora must have picked up her mail the morning she died. The small Westline post office is only open from nine A.M. till noon, and mail doesn't arrive until eleven, so we could assume she was there about that time. The date on the paper marked the day. She put her mail in her basket and pedaled out ten miles to Windy Run. We figured she left from the post office because she didn't take the mail home. At Windy Run she parked her bike against that tree and, we assumed, began looking for wildlife to photograph. Nearly ten hours later, ten miles back towards Westline, without her bike and upstream, someone found her dead in the water.

That's what we were discussing when investigator Ron Anderson pulled up in his unmarked police car.

Anderson was the last of the old-school cops. He'd been with the Pennsylvania state police longer than we could remember. While you were always aware he was a cop, if you ran into him in a bar or on the street or anywhere, you knew you could talk to him like he was a friend and neighbor who just happened to also be a policeman. We

knew his family, he knew our families—he was the one who arrested us when we broke into that camp twenty-some years before when he was a patrol officer. He attended many social functions and was active in community affairs. What it boiled down to was that we had a lot of respect for Anderson as a friend, neighbor, and policeman. He was a common sense cop who knew that if he had something to solve he needed us as much as at times we might need him. That's part of the old-school thinking—quid pro quo.

Anderson climbed out of the car and removed his sport jacket.

"You've been spending an awful lot of time in our little town, Ron," Longstreet said. "Is it pleasure or business again?"

"Business, I'm afraid. Lately it's been nothing but business. Wish it wasn't." The big, redheaded cop pulled out a handkerchief and wiped thick beads of sweat from his reddened forehead. "The country's not what it used to be, is it? Violence, guns, kids killing kids nowadays. God, I'm glad at least I'm not working out of Philly or Pittsburgh." He loosened his tie against the heat. "But I'm here to tell you we're re-opening the investigation into Cora Crandall's drowning. And we're declaring her home a crime scene. I realize Mary's been in there cleaning it out, so what I need from you is to tell her and anyone else to stay away until we're done."

"We can do that, Ron."

"And I'm going to need a list, if not the actual items, of everything that's been removed. Can do?"

"Can do. What brought this on?"

He studied the age lines in his hands. "Certain things have come to our attention that in turn caused us to refocus on that drowning."

Longstreet looked down at the photos of Cora and Bob Crandall at art shows. He fanned them a little, tapped them against his hands, thinking, and I think he was even smiling slightly as he handed them to Anderson. "We got these developed. They were in a desk drawer at Cora's place."

Anderson leafed through the prints. "Huh. Can you figure that? Why do some women do that? Honestly. He beats her to a pulp, she goes to court, gets whatever little protection that might give her, then turns around and locks back up with him again."

Love and fear, I thought but didn't say.

"I've got a question I'd like to ask you that's been bothering me. It's got nothing to do with Cora's drowning," Longstreet said.

"Ask it. I'll answer it, if I can." He was still leafing through the photos.

"When Martin McKain committed suicide, who called you telling you he was getting ready to? Some neighbor see him with that pistol to his head?"

"He called me." Anderson leveled a look straight at Longstreet as if looking for a reaction.

Longstreet leaned his elbows against the step behind us. "Martin called you and said he was committing suicide?"

"Not exactly." Anderson's face went blank, lost in thought, deep thought, and by the deep frown that suddenly creased his face, it looked

like they could have been thoughts of regret.

He seemed to weigh how much or what he should say. "He called the barracks. Said he wanted to talk to me, that he had some information about Cora Crandall's drowning he wanted to pass on. He didn't give his name, he wouldn't, but I recognized his voice. Through our caller I.D., I knew he was calling from his home. He seemed extremely edgy when I talked to him on my cell phone after the barracks got hold of me. It just so happened I was in Westline at that moment taking care of the last few items on Cora's drowning. So, since I knew it was Martin calling, I went to his house."

Anderson massaged his fingers slowly, cracked his knuckles once, stared blankly at the hood of his car. "I guess we all make mistakes and that was one of mine—pulling into his driveway when he wanted to be anonymous. I have to live with that. He just panicked. He wasn't expecting me; he wasn't ready. Putting the gun to his head was his way of keeping me at bay. It just got worse from then on."

The only sound for the next few moments was the easy breeze rustling through nearby birch saplings.

"And that's why I allowed Robbie Sherwood to talk to him," Anderson went on. "McKain had committed no crime that I knew of. He could have been some sort of witness, judging by what he told me, but—I just wanted to prevent what I feared was going to happen, but it happened anyway. It's largely because of the Martin McKain affair that we've reopened the Cora Crandall

drowning." Anderson tossed the prints of Cora and Bob Crandall onto his front seat. "These photos are interesting. Thanks. I'll be over to your place in a day or so to get that list, and I probably should have a statement from someone who took these photos from the drawer to verify they came from Cora's house."

I thought Longstreet was going to tell Anderson about Bob Crandall taking the photos from the drawer, but he didn't. Nor did he mention Duke Day's finding Cora's bike out Windy Run, the mail, the empty film box, the newspaper, or the film Mary was just then having developed. Had Mary still been there when Anderson arrived, Longstreet might have just turned the second roll of film over to him. I realized then that Longstreet was probably stewing still over someone clubbing his wife, and if and when he found the guy, there was going to be a personal score to settle.

Instead Longstreet asked Anderson, just as the cop was climbing into his car, "Was there any film in Cora's camera when you found her in the creek?"

"We didn't find any. The back of the camera had popped open. Maybe she was getting ready to load a roll when she fell. Or maybe the film in the camera got knocked out when she hit the rocks. We searched downstream, but if there *was* film in her camera, it's in the Kinzua Reservoir by now."

He gave us a wave and left, heading for Cora Crandall's place to take over the crime scene.

"Meat." Dempsy said.

"Meet?" Longstreet asked. "Like they're having a meeting?"

"Mete?" I asked. To me it looked like the pictures showed two men doling something out of the back of the semi.

"That's a refrigerated tractor trailer loaded with fresh meat." Dempsy clunked his heavy arm cast on top of Longstreet's kitchen table so hard it toppled the salt shaker. Our wannabe woodsman from Ohio was also a wannabe bow hunter. He was building a tree stand to shoot his bow from in deer season when he fell out of the tree and broke his arm in two places. There'd be no archery for Dempsy this year. Kind of hard to draw a bow in a full arm cast.

Dempsy had stopped in to borrow something from Longstreet just about the time Mary had returned with the twelve shots developed.

"Those dark brown square boxes you see stacked there at the end of the trailer are Monfort boxes—filled with fresh meat. The long boxes are Dubuque and probably contain whole pork loins."

"You're sure?" Longstreet said.

"Oh yeah. See the vapor coming out the back doors of the truck where the cooled air inside is hitting the warmer outside air? Everything is being chilled in that truck. When I worked for that meat company in Austinburg, Ohio, I unloaded and loaded tons of those boxes. What you see hanging down in the center of the trailer is called swinging beef: fresh sides, halves, rounds, whole steers, maybe. Yes sir, that's a semi loaded with fresh meat. Depending on what's in those Monfort boxes—short loins for porterhouse and T-

bones; strip loins for strip steaks; rib-eyes for prime rib, or tenderloins for filet—that's a very valuable cargo those guys are unloading."

"Hijacked and resold?" Longstreet just threw the question out there.

Dempsy smiled weakly. "Might be legit, but where those guys are, back in those woods, that doesn't look like it would be a regular stop. I'm sure they're hijacking it. And everyone loves beef. There'd be no problem selling it on the street. But the stuff they're unloading has to be refrigerated somewhere."

"How?" I asked.

"For that much stuff someone has to have a large walk-in cooler."

Of the twelve photos Mary'd had developed, eight were nature shots. The last four showed a semi tractor trailer backed onto a fresh-cut dirt road deep in the woods. Two men stood in the back of the trailer unloading what Dempsy said were boxes of fresh meat. To the right we could see what looked like a white truck or van and a set of feet near the back of that vehicle. The problem was that a large growth of thick summer foliage and heavy brush obscured our view of the third guy. We didn't recognize either of the two men in the back of the trailer.

Longstreet began sorting the eight nature shots into the order the photos were taken, using the strips of numbered negatives as a guide.

I continued to study the four photos of the semi. It bore a New York State license plate, but I couldn't quite read the plate number. Plus, the truck was jackknifed at an awk-



ward angle so that all I could read of the company's name on the side of the trailer was TRANSPORTATION. And I could see a large yellow sun with a smiley face painted on the side of the truck.

The two men in the back of the trailer seemed to be stacking the Monfort boxes, each box appearing to be about three feet square by maybe eighteen inches high. The Dubuque pork loin boxes were about four feet long and narrow, about eighteen inches high and wide. Altogether I counted twenty-two boxes of beef and pork stacked for unloading right there in the woods. God knows how many had already been transferred to that white vehicle.

"We can track her," Longstreet said, tapping the eight nature photos. "I can use these photos to find the spot where this semi was."

Longstreet could track a chipmunk across a bare, flat rock on a hot day, but I never heard of him or anyone else tracking with photos.

My skepticism must have showed because Longstreet said, "Look, we are sure she picked up her mail between eleven and noon. Give her an hour to pedal out to Windy Run. Windy Run runs east to west, but look at these photos. Look at the moss on the north side of the trees and on those boulders; look at the position of the sun. She's heading south; that would be to the left. That big dead tree where Duke Day found her bike is on the left at the start of Windy Run. And to the left is someone's private property."

"Yeah, but what angle left do we go? I mean, how do we know exact-

ly where to go left? She could have walked up Windy Run a mile, then cut to the left."

Longstreet had gone to the gun cabinet in his living room. He came back carrying his lightweight .22 rifle with scope. As he jammed a clip in it, he pointed at the first nature picture. "We look for that boulder right there."

The photo showed a black squirrel perched on a low branch eating a hazelnut. Kind of a neat photo—a typical Cora Crandall photo. But behind the black squirrel loomed a distinctive looking boulder, one shaped like a large heart and draped with thick green moss. Just sneaking into the picture was the road that was Windy Run, so that boulder was just off it somewhere.

"We drive up Windy Run until we spot that boulder," Longstreet said, moving towards his front door. Just as we were leaving, he scooped up the empty twenty-four exposure film box that had been in Cora's basket and dropped it in his pocket.

#### IV

#### *Something Rotten at Windy Run*

Turned out we didn't have to go very far before we spotted the heart-shaped boulder. It was fifty feet off to the left, up an embankment right at the start of the run.

Longstreet was studying the ground around the old dead maple tree where Cora had leaned her bike. I watched him reach down finally and pick up a small piece of cardboard. When he stood up, he was grinning.

"Here's the end flap from this

film box," he said, pulling it from his pocket and checking to see if the flap fit it. It did.

"She changed rolls of film here. Do you know why?"

"No."

Longstreet looked uphill towards the boulder. "Because she went up this way, south, up this hill I'll bet you. She takes eight nature pictures out of a twelve-shot roll as she's out walking around. Then something catches her attention, and she sees that parked semi, probably somewhere over that ridge there. She takes photos of those guys. Maybe she recognized them; maybe she knew something wasn't right. But she runs out of film before she can get a shot of the third guy. Make sense?"

"It might to someone. I'm a little lost."

"She comes back to her bike here, takes the twelve-shot roll out of her camera, throws it into her basket and reloads a twenty-four shot roll, unknowingly dropping this flap from the box, but because she wasn't a litterbug, she throws the empty box back in her basket. Now why isn't that second roll of film in her camera when they find her drowned a few hours later?"

"Because it fell out. Just like Anderson said. Or that empty twenty-four-shot box has been in her basket a long time." I was more amazed that Longstreet had noticed the empty box was missing a flap. I'd never noticed it, but Longstreet had a keen eye for the most minute details. It helped him be the woodsman he was. It was the big picture he often had trouble focusing on.

"Or she went back to take more pictures and got caught. And whoever caught her took the film." He watched me for an answer. "I mean, why would she leave her bike out here? Because she left with someone else who didn't know the bike was here or where it was."

He said all that with such certainty I could almost believe him.

He shifted the .22 to his other hand and headed up the embankment, studying the nature photos as he walked. I huffed and puffed behind him.

We'd walked close to twenty minutes, following what looked like a small deer trail—something Cora might have followed—until we stood at the top of the next ridge over. We had been able to spot only a few of the places Cora had stopped at that day to take pictures, but the trail got us to where, as we stood on the ridge of that second knoll, we could look down through the trees onto a fresh-cut road neither of us had known was there before.

"There's the road that semi was backed into," Longstreet said, beaming.

He'd done it. He had tracked her.

A few minutes later not only were we on the road but we'd managed to find the tiremarks and broken saplings caused by the semi backing onto the narrow road. We also spotted tiremarks from the smaller vehicle. We headed up the road to see what was there.

Where the road led was to a new camp built way, way back in the woods. It wasn't a luxurious place. It wasn't made of logs, like so many today; didn't have pressure-treated

decks all around it; had no bay windows. No sir. It was a fortified camp constructed entirely of concrete blocks. Well fortified. Lots of tire marks from the white vehicle scarred the immediate area, and it looked like someone had backed right up to the camp's front door.

The door was steel and locked tight. The windows were so small only a child could crawl through them. At the back was a large second room. When we tried to peer through the curtains, through the small closed window, we could just see the corner of what could have been one of those Monfort boxes.

A crow cawed behind us.

"Is that one of those meat boxes?" Longstreet asked.

"It might be. But if it is, it better be empty because I haven't seen anything, any kind of vents or exhausts, that would indicate there's a walk-in cooler built into this place. Doesn't even seem that electricity runs up here."

"You're right."

The heat the last few weeks had been unbearable.

The crow cawed again.

"I'd like to look in there but I can't see past that curtain."

"You break the window and whoever owns this camp will know someone's been here," I warned him. But, when I looked back at Longstreet, I saw he was gone, no longer standing behind me. I heard the crack of his .22, and a couple of minutes later he strolled around the building carrying a dead crow.

I didn't even want to ask.

Longstreet found a large rock and smashed the window glass.

"You're nuts," I said.

He grinned. "Fun to be that way, ain't it." He reached through the broken glass and parted the curtains.

Standing behind him, peering over his shoulder, I saw about thirty of those Monfort beef boxes and about twenty of the long pork loin boxes stacked neatly against the opposite wall.

Longstreet sniffed as best he could through the broken window. He shook his head. "If there's meat in them boxes sitting there in this heat all this time, I can't smell it rotting."

"Maybe they're empty."

Longstreet closed the curtain. He stuffed the dead crow through the broken window, letting it fall to the floor inside the cabin.

"One Sunday Mary had just stuck a chicken in the oven for dinner," Longstreet explained. "As we sat there talking in the kitchen, a goofy grouse flew right through our window, came sliding across the floor, and ended up right in front of the oven, dead." He laughed as he told the story. "It was like Mother Nature was saying, 'Here, try one of my chickens.' We skinned it right away, cleaned it, and popped it in the oven with the roasting chicken. It's mostly breast meat on a grouse, but it wasn't bad."

"All of which means?"

"Whoever owns this camp is going to see the broken window, and see that crow there dead. He'll assume the crow simply flew through the window, the way the grouse did, the way a lot of birds do."

I chuckled to myself.

"I want—" Longstreet snapped his head around, his eyes searching the forested hillside behind us. He concentrated on one spot. "We're being watched," he said.

I started to turn around, but he stopped me. "Don't look. I saw a flash of light from maybe the sun reflecting off a pair of field glasses. The guy's up there, but he seems to be camouflaged well."

I hadn't seen or heard anything, but a bad thought occurred to me. "Maybe it wasn't field glasses you saw glinting."

"You're right." He motioned with his head for us to walk around to the other side of the camp so the building was between us and whoever was up on the hillside. "We better vacate. It could have been a rifle scope."

Keeping the building behind us, we made our way across the ridges to Longstreet's truck.

Longstreet never spoke the entire walk back.

"Peggy Sue, I love you," Longstreet was singing into the phone the next day just as I walked into the little office he'd built out of a spare room in his house. "Thank you very much, honey. I owe you one." He nodded to me to sit down. "Yeah, well, Peggy, I wouldn't mind doing that. But Mary might have something to say about it. I'm married now, remember?" He laughed at whatever Peggy said and then hung up the phone.

"Sun Corp. Transportation out of Albany," he said to me.

"What's Sun Corp. Transportation?"

"That's the name of the outfit that bought that property and built that camp. That was Peggy Riley I was just speaking to. An old flame." He smiled contentedly to himself as if he were remembering Peggy Riley during different, wilder times. "She works at the county courthouse in Smethport. I gave her the location, and she looked it up for me. They bought it and built there several years ago."

An image of the smiley face on the yellow sun painted on the trailer flashed through my mind. "So, where's this leave us?" I asked.

He rubbed his large hands slowly down his face. Finally he said, "Something warns me we should call Anderson. I don't know why. Something's not right here."

Longstreet admitting he was fearing something made me a little uneasy.

"But actually I think we'll make two other calls. One to Bob Crandall and one to Robbie Sherwood. Up to a little meeting this afternoon? Get to the bottom of this? I'm anxious to find out who clobbered my wife."

I leaned back in the chair. He knew I'd go with him, but—"Why Crandall and Sherwood?" I asked.

"Because of Cora Crandall."

"Make sense."

"They are both connected to her, and she's dead. Bob Crandall—Bob Crandall the semi driver for some company out of New York, mind you—was Cora's husband and beat her a lot. And in spite of those lovey-dovey pictures, there's no reason to believe he ever stopped beating her. Were those two men on the back of that truck friends and co-workers of

Crandall's? Was that Crandall we couldn't identify because of the brush? Did Cora recognize him and then he spotted her?"

"And Sherwood?"

"And Sherwood because of two things. It was Cora Crandall that Martin McKain, Sherwood's former employee and friend, was calling out about, wanting to talk to Sherwood."

"And the other thing?"

"Probably the most notable. His watch, man. His expensive Rolex watch."

"You drunk?"

"Nope." Longstreet reached into his desk drawer and pulled out his .44 mag and holster. "You packing?"

I told him it was in my truck outside.

"You may need it," he said.

That made me even more uneasy.

He reached for the phone and dialed Bob Crandall's number.

"Crandall, Longstreet here. How's your nose? Hey, buddy, you forgot some pictures. Ah, we know about the semi loaded with beef; we know about the camp. Been there, done that. What we want is a cut. If not, you're going to have lots of explaining to do to Ron Anderson. So I'll tell you what. We'll meet you at the camp in one hour. You know damn well what camp. The one bought and built by Sun Corp. Transportation. Be there. One hour."

Longstreet hung up.

Next, Robbie Sherwood:

"Hey, Robbie, how's it going? How's the meat and computer business? That's right. Meat. We have pictures, buddy. We've been to your camp, the one Sun Corp. Transpor-

tation built. Yeah, Robbie, I think we need to talk. I think discussing a partnership is in order. We'll meet you at the camp in one hour. Oh, I'm sure you'll find it. If not, I know Ron Anderson can. See ya."

He stared at me a long time, saying nothing. Finally he rose. "Only one of those two will know where that camp is."

"What if both do?"

He shrugged. "Whatever. We'll handle it."

We didn't handle it very well.

About an hour later we drove to Sun Corp. Transportation's camp and parked out front. We saw no other vehicle. I was about to tell Longstreet his idea had failed, that no one was coming because neither Crandall nor Sherwood knew anything about it, when Longstreet walked to the front door and pushed the unlocked door open slowly with his foot. I felt my heart sink.

"Hello in the camp," he called into the building.

No reply.

We stepped inside and found ourselves in a front room that was nearly empty, except for a small wooden table and a couple of chairs that looked uncomfortable.

I felt uncomfortable, real queasy about being in there, so I stuck close to Longstreet, following him into the second room where the meat boxes were stacked.

The dead crow lay on the floor yet.

Longstreet was already grabbing a pork loin box, lifting the long lid.

No way could I smell any rotted meat, and in the heat it would sure-

ly have reeked. Only the dead crow was beginning to stink.

"Oh my," Longstreet exclaimed when he pulled up the lid and began pawing through the box.

"I'll say oh my," I said.

The pork loin box contained maybe fifteen fully automatic M-16's, military weapons, each carefully wrapped in a soft cloth.

Another pork loin box was filled with AK-47's, fully automatic.

The one beef box we opened held loaded magazines, pistols of assorted calibers, a couple of Uzis, and God only knew what else.

Something shuffled behind us, and I had a feeling it wasn't that crow coming back to life.

Longstreet lifted his head but didn't look to see who'd sneaked in on us.

Through a small part in the curtain I noticed a white vehicle, a van, partially hidden behind the camp.

"Well, Robbie," Longstreet said to the wall. "Seems we've diversified our computer business, doesn't it?"

We both turned. Sherwood was standing there holding an Uzi.

Robbie glanced down at the dead crow. "Your handiwork?" he asked Longstreet, keeping the Uzi pointed at our midsections. "Nice touch."

"It was the only way I could think of to find out what the hell you were up to," he said.

"How'd you know to call me?" Sherwood asked.

"Your fine, expensive Rolex watch told me."

"My watch?"

"At the bar, when you were about to fight Bob Crandall, the first thing you did was remove your watch and

hand it to me. I don't blame you. I wouldn't want it broken if it were mine. Then I put it in your pocket, and you immediately pulled it out and laid it on the bar, again so it wouldn't get broken if you and Crandall went at it. Having it flopping around in your pocket during a fight would probably get it broke quicker than if you wore it. You knew that."

"So?" Sherwood snickered. "I didn't want my watch broken."

"So," Longstreet continued, "when you went in to see Martin McKain that day, you said you were expecting a tussle with him, expecting to have to wrestle him down and take the pistol away from him. But you didn't hand Anderson your watch, a police officer who was standing right next to you. You didn't even set it on the hood of the police car. You stuck it in your pocket, the worst place for it to be if you were expecting a fight. But you weren't expecting a fight. You just didn't want to get blood all over it when you did what you went in to do—talk Martin into giving you the pistol and then kill him with it so he wouldn't tell Anderson what really happened to Cora."

"McKain was a jelly-belly."

"Like most of us, he still had a core of decency left in him."

"Decency—" Robbie began, but Longstreet cut him off.

"Where are these going?" With a nod he indicated the boxes of assorted weapons.

"Some are headed for Buffalo. Seems we have a friend up there who has friends who need to impress upon others the basic concept of staying off of one's turf."

"Gang wars."



"Call it what you want. I call it the enterprise system. The others are heading for Pittsburgh, where we have a few friends who need to make a statement to the local police. I told you already, to be successful find something people absolutely feel they must have, provide them with it, and you'll soon be rich."

"And Sun Corp.—"

"Provides them," Sherwood finished for him. "Friends I met while working in New York. They needed a place to drop shipments, a place out of the way but still close to the, ah, market, the consumers. Do you realize that almost half the population of the U.S. lives within a day's drive of this area around the Allegheny National Forest?"

"I read that in a tourist brochure," Longstreet said.

Sherwood laughed. "A *tourist brochure*?" Then his expression suddenly went cold. "Very carefully," he said, "remove your pistols from your holsters and place them on those boxes. I can sell your guns, too."

I didn't like the sound of that.

As we did what he said, Sherwood continued, "I'm assuming you weren't really interested in a partnership."

"In this? Get real, Sherwood. This is exactly what we're against. Everyone is against this."

"You get real, Longstreet. You get real. Right now, as we stand here, someone is writing laws to take all your guns away from you. People from all over are pressuring him to do that. Soon background checks won't be enough for them. They'll want more and more controls put on guns. And what do you do to stop

it? Nothing. Absolutely nothing but moan about it."

"And this is *your* answer," Longstreet said.

"Not just to cities, gangs, survivalists, or even quasi-military groups. The market here for me in a few years is going to be guys like you who now buy guns legally anywhere—honest, hardworking hunters, outdoorsmen, who did not have the backbone to stand up and fight for your rights. It's happening all over the country. With everything else. You're losing your rights. You hick. You deserve everything that happens to you. And I deserve every dollar I make because all of this has created an unbelievable market. Better than computers, even. More money." He added with a wry smile, "I used to love Bill Gates. Now I love Smith & Wesson. It's all tax free. It'll be like what Dad used to tell me moonshine was like during Prohibition."

Absurdly, given our situation, I thought: For every action, there's a reaction.

Sherwood moved us out of the back room into the front room, away from any weapon, and stood a very safe distance from us. He made us kneel and put our hands in our jeans pockets. Things were not looking very good.

"Disposing of you will be easy," Sherwood said. "I'll just roll you over some embankment miles from here, and before any hunter finds you this fall, the coons, bears, and foxes will have dined well on your bones."

"You got a little sloppy with Cora, didn't you?"

"Sloppy?" He laughed. "Yes and

no. After I caught her preserving our images, I laid her out cold, neatly, mind you—”

“Like you treated my wife.” When Longstreet’s muscles twitched reflexively and he made an awkward move to stand, Sherwood raised the Uzi.

“Beautiful woman, your wife. I may have to visit the grieving widow once in a while. In time, she’ll get itchy. She may even like the finer things in life you can’t give her. She surprised me in that house is all. All I wanted was those rolls of film—I wasn’t sure what was on them. But before I could do that, that stupid Crandall showed up, so I got out of there. Sit down, Longstreet.”

Longstreet sat back on his knees.

“But with Cora, I had to get her out of the area. I had to have her body found. Otherwise there’d be a massive search. And I didn’t need that. And *that’s* when it got sloppy. Martin, who was helping unload the guns that day, couldn’t drown her. She was just coming around, grabbing at us as we held her head underwater, and Martin started pushing at me—trying to save her, of all things. And when she finally stopped clawing, was finally dead, he crawled up the embankment whining like the cowardly little mouse he was.”

“They’ll search for us.”

“My shipments are leaving tonight in both directions. Let them search.”

Sherwood shifted his stance so that he was squared off with us. His eyes gleamed like he was involved in some sort of fantasy far, far away, and then he spoke in a

voice that didn’t sound like his voice. Worse, he used the past tense.

“I liked you, Longstreet. I really did. At one time, growing up, I admired you. But now you’re in the way. Don’t take it personally. It’s business.”

The Uzi, which could spray us with enough lead to kill ten men in seconds, came up level with our faces. I closed my eyes: The sudden loud crash I heard I was sure was Longstreet taking a full burst of lead to his head. I anticipated being next.

But that wasn’t what the loud crash was.

It was the door being kicked in; simultaneously, it was glass shattering all around as automatic rifle barrels were suddenly jammed through the small windows. Someone yelled over and over, “Get down! Get down! Get down!” Someone hurled us to the floor; a heavy boot held my head down hard. Another boot was on Longstreet’s head.

Then I heard, “Don’t, Sherwood.”

Not a shot was fired, and in two seconds it was over.

With the boot on my head still pinning me to the floor, I opened my eyes and squinted. The room suddenly seemed crowded with sets of feet. Each of the small windows I could see was full of automatic rifles. Ron Anderson strolled in wearing a long bulletproof vest.

Someone had slammed Robbie Sherwood up against the wall, where he stood spreadlegged while being cuffed. The Uzi lay on the table. And I saw the man cuffing Sherwood. The dark-haired man who once wore a red flannel shirt

while drinking at the Westline Inn now had a jacket on with ATF lettered across the back.

I don't think I was ever so glad to see anyone.

Nothing was said. Men moved in and out of the back room where the weapons were. Someone whistled, amazed.

Hands grabbed me, stood me up, helped Longstreet up. Both of us were cuffed and thrown into the back of Anderson's police car.

I don't think I was ever so glad to be cuffed in the back of a police car, either. I was just glad to be out of that death house.

### *Epilogue*

I wrestled with the sheets in bed a week later. Summer fog crept down over the hills.

We were material witnesses, Anderson had told us, and we'd be expected to testify at Sherwood's trial.

"How did you know about the camp?" Longstreet asked that afternoon when we were still in the barracks, uncuffed by that time.

ATF agent Haskell leaned against the wall sipping coffee out of a yellow plastic cup, saying nothing.

"We found it the same way you did, but we came from another direction," Anderson explained. "When I ran those rifles I took out of Martin McKain's place through our computer, they came up listed as stolen. The ATF was notified, and it turned out they'd been tracking those guns. They sent in Agent Haskell. They knew Sun Corp. Transportation had something to do with them, but kept losing the shipments." Ander-

son paused and sipped his own coffee. He said he wished it was a beer. "Knowing guns were possibly being sent into this area, we went to the four area courthouses to look for property that might be owned by Sun Corp. Bingo. We found that one. Then we watched it."

"Nice trick with the crow," Haskell told Longstreet. "I'll have to remember that one." It was the only thing the ATF agent said to us, and we knew then who'd been perched on that hillside with field glasses.

The thick fog crept lower, obscuring the entire mountain right outside my bedroom window.

Crandall got thrown in jail after Anderson turned the photos over to the D.A., so it was a clean sweep all around. The judge signed a warrant, and Crandall was brought in so quick the ink hadn't dried by the time he was standing before him.

The judge admonished Crandall: "I told you what I'd do if you violated that court order. And believe me, if the young lady were alive, she'd be standing here, too. Three hundred sixty-five days in the county jail."

Bang went the gavel; out the door in cuffs went Crandall.

Sherwood, always proud of making business deals, was trying to make deals of another kind with the D.A. and the Feds, particularly when he learned Sun Corp. was going to let him swing alone. They denied any involvement, would fight the "ridiculous charges" with every resource. So Sherwood, facing two counts of murder and a bunch of federal charges, was anxious to find friends anywhere he could.

Even madmen make sense some-

times, and I think that's what I was wrestling with that morning.

By then everything was obscured in fog and a heavy haze.

Although none of us who believe in gun ownership would agree with what Sherwood was doing, he made some sense that day in the camp.

What happens is exactly as Sherwood said; people don't know when to stop.

And for every action, there's a reaction.

And no one seems to consider one of life's little paradoxes: too many controls and you risk losing control.

But in spite of how much I liked him, Sherwood with no controls was no better, and in a greater way worse. What he was up to depressed me and dismantled my thinking.

I wrestled with that watching the fog.

Action and reaction. Extremes. Neither of the two extremes seemed especially appealing. Somewhere between the extremes is where I found myself languishing.

I heard two shots. They sounded like they came from somewhere near Longstreet's house; had I not known otherwise, I'd have guessed he'd fired his .270 and solved his beaver problem. The shots could have come from about anywhere, though.

Longstreet had never really said whether the episode with Sherwood had affected him in any way. But he

was quieter, I noticed, for a few days. Moodier, too, it seemed.

I do know this. Longstreet found a middle ground with his beavers. He might not call it that, but that's what he did. He didn't want the beavers there clogging up his septic system, naturally, but he really didn't want to shoot them either and then just kick the carcasses over a bank to rot.

So he gave it one more try—using coyote scent he got from a trapper friend. The stuff came in a little bottle and smelled a hundred gazillion times stronger than where a dog, say, piddled on the carpet. But it worked. A few drops of coyote scent on small rags were set around the dam, and the next thing we saw that evening was them two beavers getting a good whiff of their natural enemy. Probably thinking they were surrounded, they hiked out of there pronto, waddling off into the woods to set up somewhere else. Then we dismantled the dam.

For every extreme action, there's an extreme reaction—be it beavers or bullets—and there's also the ground between those two extremes where common sense seems to lie dormant for too long.

I was seeking that ground.

I was seeking a way to give without giving in.

And that was what I was wrestling with when the fog began to lift.

# UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the December issue.*

Sno-Bird, Inc., was celebrating a highly successful year as a mail order business handling winter wear. The young company sold boots, jackets, ski pants, sweaters, warm undergarments, and wool socks. Each item was manufactured by a different supplier, who held a contract with Sno-Bird for his entire output. Their factories were located in different states; one was in Texas.

Victor Jorgensen, president of Sno-Bird, invited each supplier and his wife to a Saturday night gala dinner at a downtown Chicago hotel restaurant near company headquarters. After the cocktail hour, a sumptuous dinner was served with choice wines. The highlight of the evening was an announcement by President Jorgensen.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he declared, "it gives me great pleasure to award one of my suppliers with a special bonus of ten thousand dollars for the quality and workmanship of his product." When he announced the name of the recipient, nearly everyone cheered.

One supplier, however, was infuriated that the award had not gone to *him*. As Jorgensen presented the check, the man rose unsteadily and shouted in a drunken voice, "F-f-frameup! Unfair!" He lurched onto the dais and in front of the horrified audience seized the recipient by the throat. The two men struggled briefly, staggered, and fell.

Pandemonium swept the banquet hall. Women screamed; men rushed onstage to pull off the assailant and help the choked man to his feet. The latter gasped, "My heart . . ." and collapsed.

President Jorgensen yelled, "Someone call the hospital!" and knelt by the stricken man. He felt for a pulse; there was none. The man was dead. Hearing the commotion, hotel security personnel came running. One of them had the presence of mind to phone the police.

The dead man's wife sobbed, "My husband had a weak heart. His physician warned him against undue stress. Oh God, what will I do?"

Captain Lance Reddy of Homicide arrived and took charge. Everyone started talking at once. "Quiet!" he ordered. "I'll question you one at a time." From their disjointed accounts he soon ascertained:

(1) A different couple arrived in Chicago each day of the week, Monday through Saturday. The first three arrivals included Elmo (who isn't

Mr. Palmer), Jill's husband, and the man from South Carolina. One of them was the victim. The man who manufactured sweaters came later.

(2) Andy, Bert, and Clem included Kate's husband, Mr. Monroe, and the man from Wisconsin. All three arrived after the man who manufactured wool socks, but none came on Friday.

(3) Ginny, Ida, and Lily were married to Fred (who did not make undergarments), Mr. Newton, and the man from Tennessee. None of their husbands owned the boot factory.

(4) Dave (who wasn't the man from South Carolina), Lily's husband, and the man from Virginia had the last names of Newton, O'Dare, and Queen. They did not include the maker of ski pants.

(5) Andy (who was not Mr. Raber), Helen's husband, and the man who arrived first were from South Carolina, Tennessee, and Utah. The man who manufactured undergarments was from a different state. None of the four was the killer or the victim.

(6) Both Bert (who did not make boots) and Mr. Raber (who did not arrive Wednesday) came more than one day before the man who manufactured jackets (who did not come on Friday).

(7) Neither Ginny's husband nor Mr. O'Dare arrived on Friday.

(8) Dave (who did not arrive Friday) was neither Helen's husband (who did not arrive Saturday) nor the man from Tennessee (who was not Mr. Raber).

Captain Reddy then knew the identities of both killer and victim. He arrested the former, whose wife pleaded, "My husband was drunk. He didn't mean to kill anybody."

"That doesn't alter the circumstances, ma'am," the captain informed her. "A man is dead, and it's a clearcut case of second-degree murder."

*Who, in a drunken, jealous rage, killed whom?*

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See page 140 for the solution to the October puzzle.



# RED! RED! RED!

Patricia Hughes



**“S**he lied.  
 “She cried.  
 “And then she died,” the old woman in the recliner chanted. Weird, I thought, but said nothing.

The medication aide pointed. “Undies go in that dresser. Dirty laundry’s in the hamper over there.”

I set down the basket, and moved toward the closet. Picking up laundry was not a normal part of my workday, but that particular day it headed a long list of errands, none of which had appeared on my job description.

“Make it.

“Break it.

“Rake it.”

The old woman’s upper body bobbed in rhythm with the beat of her words.

"Pretty,  
"Itty  
"Bitty  
"Kitty."

I opened the closet door. "Does she always rhyme?"

"Always." The aide rolled her eyes. "You know how crazy old folks get."  
The old woman trilled.

"Purrrr.  
"Furrrr."

As I hung the clothes in the closet, the med aide walked out the door. A large bottle of Maalox liquid antacid shot up from her medication cart, threw off its cap, and dumped its contents on her head. She ran screaming down the hall, leaving a trail of milky droppings in her wake.

"Granny?" I whispered through my teeth.

The bottle clattered to the floor. Granny Grace materialized beside me—the twenty-year-old flapper version, that is. (Granny says the best part of being dead is being able to look young again. Although, I'm not sure why. Usually, I'm the only one who can see her.) "Crazy indeed!" snapped Granny. "People should be more respectful of their elders!"

Still talking through my teeth, I said, "Granny, you've got to stop doing these things."

"Humph!" Granny disappeared in a cloud of black smoke, visible only to me.

"Drive far.  
"Move the car."

A nurse appeared in the doorway. "What happened?"

I dodged the issue. "I'm not sure—something in the hallway. I was in here."

"I told the D.O.N. that girl wouldn't work out." The nurse took possession of the cart and pushed it toward the nurses' station.

As I placed the clean clothes in the dresser, I noticed a crumpled photo of a redheaded toddler. "Cute," I said, picking it up and taking a closer look.

"Red! Red! Red!  
"Shot in the head!  
"She's dead! She's dead!"

Prickly little critters scampered up the back of my neck. What kind of thing was that for an old lady to be saying?

"Miz Mawdsen mos'ly talk nonsense, but sometime . . ."

Large and black, an aide carrying a food tray lumbered into the room. Wisps of white wove through her short hair. Her nametag read CHAUNSY TAYLOR. "Sometime she talk scary."

With a confidence born of years of doing a job well, Chaunsy set the tray on the over-bed table, swung the table around, and lowered it in front of the old woman. She tied a large bib around her charge, uncovered the dishes, and pulled up a chair for herself. "It's time to eat, Miz Lorena." She flashed a smile, revealing a star inlaid in a gold cap on one of her front teeth.

She had to be older than she looked. She had probably followed grandchildren from some rural community to Houston—or maybe great-grandchildren.

“Chill her.

“Kill her.

“Fill in her grave.”

Prickly critters scampered again. “I guess this is pretty hard on Mr. Marsden.”

“That son?” Chaunsy spooned some pureed meat into the woman’s mouth. “He come every Christmas—mostly to complain. His secretary Miz Sandra takes care o’ his mama.”

“Well, I never!” Granny Grace materialized again.

Chaunsy neither saw nor heard.

I replaced the photo, opened the hamper, and pulled out the dirty clothes. Chaunsy eyed the bag. “That Miz Sandra quit?”

“Vacation. I’m her substitute—Dallas McGee.” I pulled the drawstring shut. “Has Mrs. Marsden been here long?”

“Four years.” Mrs. Marsden rolled her peas out of her mouth. Chaunsy caught them in the spoon and rolled them right back in. “They say she was fine. Drove her own car till she disappeared. They found her mor’n six hundred miles away—in a bus station in Amarillo—jes’ sittin’, silent, and clutchin’ that photo you was holdin’. Couldn’t talk no mo’.”

“How awful,” I said.

“For a whole year she doesn’t say a word.” Chaunsy spooned up some potatoes. “Then, three years ago, she strokes and starts talkin’ po’try. Been talkin’ it ever since.”

Lorena Marsden’s past had sparked my interest. “Who’s the child in the photo?”

“They don’t know.”

“With that carrot top she has to be a relative.” The toddler had reminded me of Jefferson Marsden.

“They don’t know,” Chaunsy repeated, momentarily suspending the spoon in mid-air. “But she was holdin’ on to it, an’ she don’t like nobody to take it away.”

“Red! Red! Red!

“Shot in the head!

“She’s dead! She’s dead!

“Red! Red! Red!”

“Kind of spooky, isn’t she?” said Granny.

I tried not to react. When ghosts start calling people spooky, life has become just too bizarre.

I took my leave of Chaunsy and Mrs. Marsden. When I was safely in my car, I said, “Granny!”

“Don’t fuss!” Granny sprang into existence beside me. “The woman deserved it. Talking that way about ‘old folks.’”

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"Whatever she may have deserved, it's me who's going to get in trouble over your antics."

"Nobody got in trouble—except maybe that twit. That old woman is interesting, though. Aren't you curious about what happened to her?"

"No," I lied. "That 'old woman' is younger than you were when you died. Considering which, why are you still here anyway?" The ghostly essence of Granny Grace had popped into existence a few weeks earlier to stop my sister Savannah's ill-advised wedding to Langston St. James.

"Dallas, you wound me to the core. That's no way to talk to your great-grandmother!"

I glanced at the youthful spectre draped in canary yellow. "You don't look much like a great-grandmother. You don't act like one either."

"Well, I'm your great-grandmother, and you're supposed to take me back to Donner House. That's where your Grandpa Rhett died, and I told you before, I'm not taking a chance of missing him by leaving this earth from somewhere else."

"You could have attached yourself to Grandpa Roy or Mother and gone home with them."

"I was mad at them. They actually wanted Savannah to marry that reprobate."

"You won't get home very fast hanging around me. Several people in the firm are on vacation, and I just took off, for both your funeral and Savannah's aborted wedding. It will be some time before I can get off again."

"I'm not complaining."

I was. My social life was a shambles. How does one explain to a guy that the reason you gasped and jumped out of his embrace is that your great-granny's ghost just burst into full bloom between your respective noses? One doesn't, and he usually doesn't call again.

To make matters worse, that morning I'd been uprooted from my cosy little nook in the accounting department of Marsden International Commerce, Inc., and transplanted to Sandra Carroll's desk. In the few hours I'd been there, I had already gained immeasurable respect for her endurance. There's almost nothing she doesn't do for Jefferson Marsden.

I tried getting out of it, but my supervisor said, "Mr. Marsden expects Miss Carroll's replacement to know the company. Despite the fact that you prefer bookkeeping, your secretarial skills are quite adequate. You're the best available choice at the moment. We do want to keep Mr. Marsden happy, don't we?"

I really didn't care about Mr. Marsden's happiness, and I wasn't sure if I'd been complimented or insulted. But clearly, if I wanted to get back to my usual slot sans problems, I had to make the most of the next two weeks.

I deposited the laundry in the hands of Mr. Marsden's housekeeper, completed the other errands on my list, and headed back to the office.

Marsden was pacing. He glanced at his watch. "Do you usually take three hour lunches?"

"Sir?"

"I said you're late."

"Excuse me? I took care of your mother's laundry, took your suits to the dry cleaners, picked up a birthday gift for your Aunt Estelle, delivered ..."

"Never mind," he interrupted. "Miss Carroll usually does those things after hours."

I'm not usually militant, but guys like Jefferson Marsden might push me over the edge. "With all due respect, sir, I usually go home after hours." I placed the wrapped gift on his desk.

"You will be appropriately compensated, Miss McGee, but there are certain tasks I require which may not be found in a standard job description. Right now I want you to go home and pack for a two-night stayover."

"I beg your pardon?" All of a sudden my little nook was beginning to look much less cosy. Glaring, Granny poked her head down through the ceiling.

"The realtor has a buyer for the lake property. I need to remove some personal items from the cabin. I also need to send some letters I've yet to dictate and a report to prepare. You'll have to come with me."

"Mr. Marsden—" I began.

"Come now, Miss McGee. This is strictly business. The cabin has three bedrooms. You'll be quite safe, I assure you."

I couldn't resist. "What about my two kids and the dog?"

"You have children?" His eyes widened.

"Actually, no. But many people do. You didn't even ask if this 'stayover' was feasible." I might have had plans—that is, before Granny started hanging around.

His face reddened several shades deeper than his hair. "It is my understanding that you are single with no impediments. I expect you to be packed and back here as quickly as possible. On your way, deliver that to Aunt Estelle."

I plucked the box from the desk. "Care to know what's in it?"

"Pick up my suitcase from Mrs. Escobar." He clasped his hands behind his back, took a breath, and rocked back slightly on his heels. He exhaled audibly. "You may bring the dog."

I put my hand on the doorknob. "I don't have a dog, either."

"Cabin" was clearly an understatement for the massive structure that stood on the shore of one of the many lakes in the Piney Woods. While its horizontally stacked logs broke the vertical lines of the towering slash pines, the natural surroundings lay largely undisturbed. A simple stepping-stone path meandered down to the dock. Deep red climbing roses covered most of the right side of the house. A shed stood to the left. A tan Volvo was parked out front.

Sandra Carroll came running.

"Miss Carroll!" Marsden said. "You're supposed to be on vacation!"

"There wasn't any place special I wanted to go, and I knew you'd be sell-

ing the Lake House soon. I thought I might save you the trouble of . . .” She paused. Looking at her looking at him, there wasn’t any doubt in my mind why Sandra Carroll had indentured herself to this turkey. Then she looked at me—as if her blood had frozen in her veins.

“Miss McGee is substituting for you at the office,” he explained.

“But if you need me, Mr. Marsden . . .”

“Miss Carroll, you haven’t had a vacation in five years. I insist on your taking some time off.”

Her gaze centered on the ground around her feet. “Of course. I’ll leave right away.”

“Nonsense. It’s getting dark. You will leave first thing in the morning.”

He grabbed his bag and mine. “Bring my briefcase, Miss McGee.”

“Talk about a jerk.” Invisible, Granny spoke into my right ear.

I reached for the briefcase. Sandra was quicker. “I really don’t need a vacation,” she said. “Mr. Marsden just insists.”

“How long have you been his secretary?” I asked as we started for the house.

“Almost eleven years.”

I stopped. “And he still calls you ‘Miss Carroll’?”

Her features stiffened. “Mr. Marsden is a gentleman.”

“Mr. Marsden is a pompous ass,” said Granny.

I’ve never considered myself a slouch, but Sandra Carroll’s energy was mind-boggling. She threw together a masterpiece of a dinner from practically nothing, then proceeded to relieve me of my secretarial duties—with only a minimal protest from Marsden. I didn’t press the issue. It wasn’t important to me. It was to Sandra Carroll.

I laundered three sets of musty sheets and removed a large quantity of dust from our surroundings. I thought I had kept myself out of trouble. I should have known better.

Moonlight shimmering on the lake drew me outside. Carefully I picked my way along the stepping-stones. The sultry night air boded change.

Before I reached the dock, I found Sandra—crying. I had begun what I considered a discreet exit when Granny hollered, “Dallas! You come back here and help this girl!” I jumped so I must have broken every twig in the square yard surrounding me.

“Oh!” exclaimed Sandra.

“Sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to intrude. I’ll go back inside.”

“Wait! You . . . you must not mention this to Mr. Marsden. He’ll misunderstand.”

“Will he?”

“Yes.” She chewed nervously on her lower lip. “It’s this place. At the office he pours himself into his work, but here—” The wind picked up. Cloud fingers stretched in front of the moon. Sandra folded her arms close to her body and looked at the ground. “Harmony is everywhere.”



It took a moment for it to register that Harmony was a person.

"This became her special place," said Sandra. "Sometimes I feel like she's standing right beside me."

"She is," said Granny.

"Who is?" I hate it when I respond aloud to Granny without thinking.

"Harmony," said Granny.

Sandra looked at me blankly. "I mean, who is Harmony?" I said.

"Mr. Marsden's wife," replied Sandra.

"I didn't know he had a wife."

"She's been gone six years."

"There she goes," said Granny. "Up to the house to look for Mr. God."

Granny is the only ghost I can see, but she has this irritating habit of keeping me informed of the activities of each restless spirit we come across. I was much happier not knowing. "How did she die?" I asked Sandra.

"Harmony's not dead. She ran off with a musician."

"Harmony doesn't seem to know she's dead either, but I beg to differ with both of them," said Granny. "She walked through that wall as easily as I can."

I didn't like the picture that was forming in my head. Six years ago, wife runs off—except that her ghost is hanging around their lake house?

"Divorced?" I asked.

"Oh no!" said Sandra. "Even if she divorced him, it doesn't matter. Mr. Marsden is a devout Catholic. They were married in the church."

"Isn't there special dispensation when someone runs off with another man?"

"I can't explain it." She leaned against the trunk of a large pine. "He's become so bitter. First Harmony ran off; then his mother's ordeal. No one really knows what happened to her."

"She talks in rhyme," I said.

"Since her stroke."

"What happened before that? One of the aides indicated she became catatonic after a disappearance."

"Mr. Marsden thinks she was kidnapped. That's something else about this place. They found Miss Lorena's car here."

"Ransom note?"

"No. She told her housekeeper she was going to the lake house but would be back in a couple of days. She did that sometimes. She loved to putter in the rose garden or just sit on the dock." Sandra shifted position. "Mr. Marsden was in Berlin. When Miss Lorena didn't come home and didn't answer the phone, Irma called me." The night darkened. Clouds rushed to cover the stars. "We were frantic," she said. "We checked hospitals, called the various authorities. Like I said, they found her car here. Nothing else. Miss Lorena had bought some gardening supplies down the road not long after she arrived. No one had seen her after that."

Sandra pulled some needles from the pine and began bending them back

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and forth. "The police tapped the phone. We waited. The phone never rang. The note never arrived. They were just about to do a more extensive search of the lake property when we got the call from the Amarillo police."

She let the needles fall to the ground. "She was in shock—totally uncommunicative. Fortunately she had identification in her purse, or she would have wound up a Jane Doe in a psychiatric ward."

"She had her purse?"

"Even money, a good deal of money, actually." I frowned. "I know. None of it makes sense," said Sandra. "Lorena Marsden was a wonderful woman, active, intelligent. She could speak on any subject. She did aerobics like a teenager. To see such a change—almost overnight."

She moved closer. "You should have known her. She was devoted to her son. It broke her heart when he married Harmony."

Sandra and Lorena had a lot in common.

Thunder rumbled in the distance.

Sandra's voice remained low, but her words spewed forth like pent-up waters through a crack in the dam. "Harmony was the antithesis of Jefferson Marsden. She was a child of hippies—raised on the road and in communes. She claimed to have been born at Woodstock. Who would have dreamed he would find her attractive?" Thunder rumbled again. The wind whipped a fine mist against my cheeks. Sandra's voice quivered—became almost inaudible. "But he did. She was young—pretty in an earthy sort of way." A tear pooled in her left eye, then slid silently down her cheek. "Nothing was ever the same after he met her."

Getting a good night's sleep while wondering if the man across the hall is a murderer isn't easy, but I tried. I drifted off into a dream. Blood-red waves lashed. Huge dynamos hummed in grisly rhythm. Within their drone I heard the chant:

"Red! Red! Red!

"Shot in the head!

"She's dead! She's dead!

"Red! Red! Red!"

Thunder crashed. Rain pelted the roof and clattered against the window pane. I bolted upright in bed. "Jumpy, aren't we?" said Granny.

"I live with a ghost. I'm supposed to be jumpy."

"Do you think he killed her?"

"Why don't you ask Harmony?"

"I did. She doesn't know she's dead. She can't imagine why I would say such a thing; and she doesn't understand why 'Jeff' won't pay any attention to her—especially when she has something so important to tell him."

"What?"

"She can't remember."

"That's helpful."

Granny was suspended about three feet above the bed in a lotus posi-

tion. "I think he did it. That's what happened to Mother Marsden. Somehow, two years after the deed, she found out her baby was a coldblooded murderer, and she couldn't face it."

"So she freaks and hops a bus to Amarillo?"

"I'm working on that part."

"We don't know Harmony was murdered. We simply know she's dead, but her body must be near for her to be wandering around here." (In order to remain in this realm, a spirit must maintain a connection to something of the earth.)

"She could have attached to the house," said Granny.

"Either way," I replied, "there's a good chance the body's close by."

"I'll bet he dumped her in the lake. Maybe he drowned her. That's why he never bothered with a divorce. You don't divorce a dead woman."

"If this was her 'special place,' as Sandra put it, she could have come up here and drowned accidentally—or died in some other way."

"I'm searching the lake."

"You do that. Lake bottom is bad for my lungs. I'm going back to sleep."

That was mostly wishful thinking, but things looked brighter in the morning—at least for a while. I had just wrapped my mouth around a sumptuous morsel of omelette à la Sandra Carroll when Granny popped through the table. "She's not in the lake."

I polished off my omelette—a terrible thing to do to something that ought to be savored—and took my coffee down to the dock. The sun peeped through the trees in the east and danced across the water.

I inhaled the fresh, earthy scent left by the rain. "It's a big lake."

"And I've searched it thoroughly, as far as I can," said Granny. "I don't think Harmony would be any farther away from her body or the house than I can get from you."

"Then she must be somewhere around here other than in the lake."

If Harmony's body wasn't in the lake, why hadn't it been found during the subsequent years? I didn't like the way this was shaping up.

As the day progressed, Marsden seemed quite content to rattle off epistles in the direction of the ever-efficient Sandra Carroll. All talk of her leaving had ceased. I busied myself boxing up the contents of several cabinets.

Marsden drove off to post the completed letters, leaving Sandra to put the finishing touches on his report. That's when I picked up the china teapot.

It rattled.

Inside I found a beautiful, intricately ornate antique locket with a broken chain. There were traces of something brown in the area of the break. Blood? "Look at this." I showed the locket to Sandra.

"Victoria's locket," she gasped. Her fingers froze above the keyboard. "Where did you get that?"

"Out of a teapot. Strange place, don't you think? It looks valuable."

"It's been passed to the bride of the eldest Marsden son since Victoria Marsden gave it to her daughter-in-law in the seventeenth century. Miss

Lorena gave it to Harmony, though she wasn't happy about it." Sandra's eyes widened. "I don't understand. What is it doing here?"

I dropped the locket into her hand. She fingered the break. "What happened to it?"

"I don't know, but it gives a good impression of having been ripped off someone's neck."

We drifted back to our respective chores, the questions raised by the locket unanswered. I wrapped the teapot carefully in newspaper and placed it in the box.

Granny whispered in my ear, "Come outside. I've found her." Sandra paid little attention to me. Her hands raced across the keyboard, pausing only occasionally to finger the locket again.

Outside, Granny led me to the end of the rosebed. "She's under there."

The scent of roses and pine mingled heavily in the warm air. "That's lovely. She certainly didn't get down there accidentally."

"Furthermore, the back of her skull is missing. Let's get you out of here."

"I'm not in the mood for walking." I retrieved my cell phone from the house as some measure of security; then got gloves, shovel, and hatchet from the shed. "Tell me where to start."

"Dallas! Marsden could be back any moment."

"So help me dig." (Granny has become expert at moving inanimate objects.)

The body was not buried all that deep, but it was necessary to separate some rosebushes from their root systems. Soon we had exposed the skull and the right arm and hand. An earthy, moldy odor wafted amidst the floral essence.

The roses had seen better days. So had the remains. A jagged entrance wound passed through the front of the skull. According to Granny, there was an enormous exit wound in the back—large caliber at close range.

A ring adorned a bony finger. I brushed away as much soil as I could. Even with dirt caked in the crevices, that was one gorgeous sapphire.

Sandra called my name, then appeared at the front door. "What in the world are you doing?" She started toward me. "You . . ." She stopped cold. I thought she was going to scream, but a guttural squeak issued from her throat. She drew her breath noisily. "Harmony!"

"What makes you say that?"

"The ring. I picked it out for her birthday."

"I think it's time for the cops." I reached for my cell phone.

"No!" Sandra picked up the shovel. "Put down the phone." She shuffled her feet nervously. "We need to think this through."

"What's to think? This is a murder victim."

"We're going to put this back the way it was."

I glanced at the hacked up roots. "I don't think so."

"They'll think he did it."

"You think he didn't?" Those prickly critters stopped scampering and

started stampeding up my backbone. "Or do you know he didn't?" Marsden wasn't the only one in this picture with a motive for killing Harmony.

"You don't think . . ."

She never finished her sentence. The sound of a motor heralded Marsden's return.

"What's going on here?" he demanded. Sandra paled. "I leave, and the two of you decide to destroy the roses?" Tears streamed down Sandra's cheeks. Marsden strode toward us. "My God!" He fell to his knees beside the skeleton. "Harmony?" His lower lip quivered. Sandra hid her face and sobbed audibly.

"Okay," I said. "So which one of you did it?"

I'm really not that brave or that stupid. I had already seen the hatchet rise and hover behind them.

They stared at each other. "*You* killed Harmony?" they asked, almost in unison.

In the end Marsden called the sheriff himself. When the deputies got around to questioning me, naturally they wanted to know why I was digging up the roses in the first place. I lied. I said a stray dog had been digging and exposed enough to make me suspicious.

Past that, they seemed to have little interest in me. For that matter, they had little interest in Sandra, which I considered imbecilic. They zeroed in on Marsden. They weren't looking for any other possibilities.

I didn't like it. For one thing I pride myself on interpreting body language. I would have sworn Marsden and Sandra genuinely suspected each other. Besides, little things bothered me. Why the shallow grave so close to the house? It's a wonder an animal hadn't dug it up. Why leave the locket in the teapot? Especially for so many years?

I was back on the dock with Granny hovering around when I finally engaged brain. "How totally stupid!"

"They are making Dolph Chandler look pretty good," said Granny, eyeing the deputies. (Dolph Chandler was our sheriff back home.)

"I meant us," I said.

"Us?"

"Granny, you're the one who's always pointing out how people don't give enough credit to the senior population."

"Well, they don't. A person gets a little hard of hearing, answers what she heard instead of what was asked, and the next thing you know, someone is calling her senile."

"So who might have trouble moving the body farther? Who might have been unable to retrieve the locket? Who's been sitting around describing the murder?"

I repeated Lorena's rhyme, "Red! Red! Red! Shot in the head."

"Lorena killed Harmony?"

"She's been telling anyone who would listen. Except that no one listens to a 'crazy old woman,' Granny. Not me, not even you."

Granny plummeted to the ground. She was chest-deep in the middle of the dock. "That's just grand, Dallas. Those flatfoots are railroading an innocent man, and it's your fault."

"My fault? I wouldn't even know Harmony was dead if it weren't for you."

"You're the one who insisted on digging her up."

"Quit arguing and go find her ghost."

"What good will that do?"

"Try some shock therapy. Confront her with that skeleton. Maybe it will jar her memory. If we're to do anything about this situation, we need some facts."

The shock therapy worked.

"I hope you're satisfied," barked Granny. "Now she knows she's dead and she's hysterical. She's wailing some kind of nonsense about karma. She probably blew her mind with hallucinogenics before Lorena blew her brains out."

"Huh?"

"She's lost her karma. Jeff's lost his karma. How can you lose your karma? Good or bad, it's what happens. She's nuts. I don't blame Lorena for shooting her. If your grandfather had married her, I'd have shot her myself. She makes Nelle look like a prize."

Nana Nelle has never been considered the most brilliant addition to our family, not that each of us doesn't have his own quirks. My mother named each of her kids for the town where she met our various fathers. Granny thinks that's the silliest thing she ever heard of—Granny, who named her only son Royal.

"Maybe she means she's lost her Karma—with a capital K," I said.

"Don't you start that stuff, too!"

"I think Karma may be the redheaded toddler—at least, that's what she was four years ago."

"Oh." Granny hovered thoughtfully. "We have to do something."

"You have to get some information out of Harmony. She's the only one who knows, and you're the only one who can communicate with her."

By the time Harmony's remains had been unscientifically removed, Granny showed up with facts.

"When Harmony left, she was pregnant. No one knew, not even she. After the guitar player deserted her, she started thinking Karma would be better off with her dad. That's why she came back, but she didn't have the child with her. When she called for Marsden, Lorena told her to meet them at the lake house. But Lorena came alone."

"According to Sandra, Marsden was in Berlin at the time," I said.

"Harmony says Lorena offered her money to stay away. She tried to tell



Lorena about Karma, but Lorena ripped the locket from her neck and accused her of lying—of trying to pass off some junkie's bastard as Jefferson's child. Lorena screamed that Harmony would never hurt Jefferson again, produced a gun, and blew Harmony away—memory and all—until I stuck her nose on the skull in the rose garden."

I shook my head. "Lorena must have come across the photo later and realized that the child had to be Marsden's. The resemblance is unmistakable."

"Poor Lorena," said Granny.

"What about poor Harmony?"

"But to find out that you have a grandchild and the only person who knows the whereabouts of that child is the woman you just killed."

"And the only way you can bring up the subject is to admit you're a murderer," I added. "Getting complicated, but making more sense. So where was the kid?"

"In Austin."

I headed for my cell phone to call my brother Austin in the city of the same name.

"*Bueno*," he answered.

"I see you're still waxing ethnic."

"*Hermanita!* I am ethnic." Austin was the product of our mother's short-lived marriage to Arturo de Leon. He was "getting in touch with his roots" while living with his father and attending the University of Texas.

"I need a favor."

"*Dios mio!* From me? I'm coming up in the world!"

"Don't get cute. I need you to check out the Piedmont Apartments on Manor Road—if they still exist. Four years ago the manager was a Mrs. Harris. Harmony Marsden left a toddler named Karma with Harris, then never came back. Find out what you can. Number one question is what happened to the kid."

"You can't be serious."

"I am."

"Hey. I have plans—a little getaway with Lola at the condo on Padre. Warm sun. Sea breeze."

"The smell of raw fish. Tar oozing up between your toes." I have a knack for the finer things in life. "This is important. I won't be here that long."

"Where's here?"

"The Piney Woods."

"What happened to Houston?"

"I got demoted."

"That's the problem with you, Dallas. No one ever knows when you're serious. Besides, if the information is four years old, what's the rush now?"

"The trail isn't getting any warmer. Besides, there's a small matter of a corpse in the rosebed."

"Now I know you're not serious."

"You want serious? How would you like Nana to find out what really happened last summer when—"

"You wouldn't!"

"Not to a brother who was so helpful when I asked a favor."

Anyone who has never been nagged by Nana Nelle could not possibly grasp the dire fate with which I had threatened Austin, but he did.

"I'll get back to you. Don't make any calls before I do, Traviesa. But I don't buy the corpse bit."

What's the point of having siblings if you can't blackmail them occasionally? I learned that from an expert—my older sister, Savannah.

Actually, I'm proud of my little brother. He's really very sharp. He called back about the time the cops left.

"The apartments are still there, ratty little complex that they are. Harris is gone, but there's a longtime tenant named Hattie Mae Washington who remembers Harris and the kid. Caused quite a stir at the time. Harris was supposed to keep the kid for a couple of days while the mother drove to Houston to talk to the kid's father. She never returned. Harris gave the kid to Child Protective. Some time later, the cops were poking around the apartments. They'd traced the car Harmony had been driving to the guy she borrowed it from. He'd reported it stolen because she never came back. He's the one who told the cops where Harmony lived. Colorado authorities had pulled the car out of a ravine near Ouray. Purse inside. No sign of Harmony."

"I tried to tell you, Austin. Harmony is the corpse in the rosebed."

Sandra clearly was not herself. While attempting to put together a late night supper, she nearly burned down the kitchen. Fortunately I make a mean tuna salad. It's a good thing I like it. No one else ate anything.

"You two might as well quit eyeing each other suspiciously," I said. "Neither of you killed Harmony."

"That's rather a change of tune," said Marsden.

"True. But since the discovery of Harmony's remains, I've been—shall we say enlightened?"

"And just how did that come about?"

"I'm not sure you'd believe it. Nonetheless, we need to discuss your daughter."

"I have no children."

"You have a daughter named Karma who is in foster care or perhaps adopted. Four years ago Harmony came back to tell you about her. As best I can figure, your mother killed Harmony and buried her in the rose garden. She thought she was protecting you."

"This is outrageous!"

"She cleaned up the evidence and got into Harmony's borrowed car, most likely to get rid of it. She drove for at least a couple of days—probably not

even knowing where she was going. At some point she found that photo of Karma. She ditched the car near Ouray and got on a bus, maybe back to Houston, maybe to somewhere else, but the bus stopped in Amarillo, where she got off. By that time she had totally disconnected from reality."

Sandra rose robotically and began clearing the table. "That is the most slanderous piece of drivel I've ever heard," snarled Marsden.

"Why? Because she's your mother? Because she's a senior citizen?"

"All of the above."

A paper plate tipped in Sandra's hand; its contents splatted on the floor. "The rhymes. It's all in the rhymes, except—" She stared at me. "A daughter named Karma?"

~~That was the explanation I'd been dreading. There's no way a stray dog~~ could tip me off about Marsden's kid. Omitting any reference to Granny, I told them about Harmony's ghost and how she'd remained to tell Marsden about Karma.

Marsden didn't like the answer. "You snoop around. You make the police think I murdered my wife. Then you accuse my mother of the deed. Now you expect me to believe a ghost told you? McGee, you're fired."

In full view of all, the remainder of the tuna salad rose and dumped itself squarely on Marsden's head.

Granny says Harmony disappeared once Marsden learned of Karma's existence. Sandra is busily tracking the kid through the system. I have no doubt Miss Efficient will find her—with or without the expensive legal eagles Marsden hired.

Marsden actually called her Sandra the other day. Granny thinks they'll ultimately make a couple. I don't know. If he married her, he'd never be able to replace his secretary.

Marsden came out all right with the authorities. Based on what I had learned from Austin, Marsden was able to prove he was in Germany for a two month period surrounding the time of Harmony's disappearance, and he's too rich to railroad in the light of actual evidence. Lorena, on the other hand, is hardly able to assist in her defense. I don't think anyone will pursue the issue further.

Lorena still sits in her recliner and chants. Marsden visits her more frequently. He's talked to her about Karma, but so far there's been no change in her condition.

I'm back in accounting. I didn't stay fired. I got a promotion. I also got two extra weeks of vacation. Granny'd better be ready to follow Grandpa Rhett. I'm taking her back to Donner House—but I wonder. Is it really going to be that simple?

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FICTION

# THE GIRL FROM WORE-OUT CANYON

Anne Weston

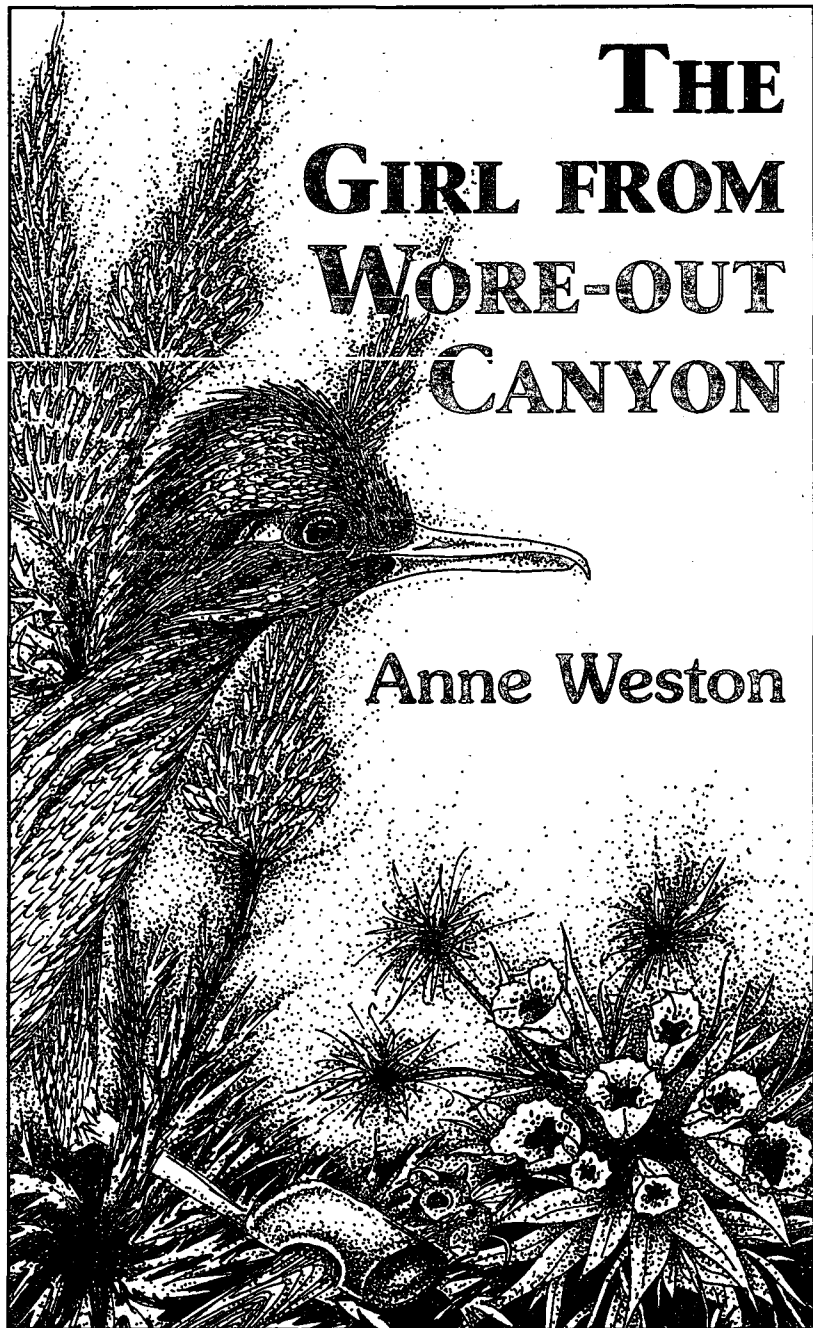


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I've lived in Wore-out Canyon since I was kneehigh to a kit fox.

I know there's different places to live. Ma used to tell me stories about cities where people live in buildings like three or four of our shacks stacked on top of each other. Or farms, where the ground's covered with green plants so thick you can't see the dirt, just like salt covers the flats where the canyon empties into the valley.

But I ain't heard those stories in a while. Ma quit talking when Pa left.

'Course, if he hadn't left, they woulda lynched him.

But as I believed then and can prove now, Pa didn't have nothing to do with what happened to the Preacher.

He wasn't a real preacher. Folks just called him that 'cause when he met up with anybody he'd talk on and on like he was preaching a sermon with visions and memories all mixed up. I guess so many years alone in the hot canyons without ever having any kind of luck had affected his brain. There weren't no harm in him though and he sure didn't deserve to have his head bashed in so it looked like a barrel cactus I once saw that a boulder had fell on.

I know how he looked 'cause it was Pa and me that found him. We saw the buzzards circling over the desert floor and knew we better go check. There he lay in the sand, ghostflowers blooming all around him and the scent of sage and pine drenching the air. His arm was stretched out, and his

hand grasped a bush like he'd tried to drag himself after somebody. The Preacher didn't deserve that, 'specially not when he had finally found something.

Pa wouldn't never have done such a thing. I admit he would take from a party whatever he could finagle out of them. But it was always a fair trade. He'd set them on the right trail and save them days of wandering around the desert trying to find the way up to Dead Dog Pass.

Every morning he'd climb the slickrock up the canyon and check the valley floor for travelers. He had real good eyes and could tell pretty easy if they had a guide with them 'cause if so they'd go straight toward the trail entrance. But if they went past it, he knew they were lost. Pa'd wait a bit to give them time to get worried. Then he'd say to me, "Maggie, let's git to work." We'd saddle up, him on his little mule and me on Jack, and head their way.

Pa could talk a real good patter. "Me and my little girl are goin' the other direction, to buy supplies," he'd say to the travelers in his soft voice. "But we'll be glad to set you folks on the trail. We'll lose a day, though, and have to put off our trip till another time. My wife will be sorely disappointed. I was s'posed to get her a new iron skillet like that one hangin' on your wagon. An' I was hopin' to buy her cloth for a new dress, too, she ain't had one in a long while." He'd get a sad look on his freckled Irish face, and pretty soon they'd be dealing. We'd take them to the water hole at the



base of the trail first and then start them on the way to the pass.

Before we parted company they'd realize we hadn't showed up by accident, but what with Pa praising the ladies on their fortitude and giving the men useful advice for the journey ahead, he'd have them feeling better than they had since hitting the desert, so they didn't mind.

And he never moved no rockpile markers as I've heard has been done elsewhere, to lead folks up a dead-end canyon and rob them.

A lot of the heavy stuff people gave us they woulda had to throw out anyway on the steep trail up to the pass. We'd take it home and swap what we didn't need for something we did. There was always somebody stopping by our place—a prospector, peddler, or just some wanderer wanting to see a human face.

Sometimes we had a houseful. The last night Pa was home, that was New Year's, half the valley happened to come by. The Preacher was there talking ninety to nothing, and China Bob, who balanced him since he hardly talked at all. Fiddler Joe sawed away on his fiddle to drown out the Preacher. Fat Mike rode up, said he was miles away and heard the music. (Fat Mike wasn't fat, he was thin as a shadow, but long ago when he first came to the valley he was real big around.) Ma and Pa started to dance, and I took turns dancing with the others, or trying to. Now and then Joe would stop playing. "Got ter lubricate my pi-aner keys," he'd say. He'd pull out a little doe-

skin bag which I coveted because of a design worked into it with porcupine quills dyed red. From it he'd take a bottle and rub turpentine into his knuckles. Then he'd start up again.

The Preacher was in rare form 'cause he had finally found something, a nugget near as big as my thumb that must have washed down a stream from the mountains. He took it out of his pocket. "Looks like a salamander," he crowed, and it did.

That was our last happy time. Next day Pa and I found the Preacher dead and his nugget gone. While we stood there looking at him a wagon load of town people showed up. They'd come down from Cold Spring to look at a site for a mine. Like us, they detoured when they saw the buzzards.

And there next to the body lay Pa's own mallet all bloody.

The town people took off in a hurry for Cold Spring. Their driver had come to our place once when his wagon axle broke, and Pa lent him that same mallet to fix it. It was a fine mallet that Pa had got off some folks from Pittsburgh, and I saw in the driver's face that he recognized it.

I was standing there trying to think what it was that didn't fit when Pa turned to me and said, "Maggie, somebody's meaning to blame me for this. I better go. You watch who starts spending money all of a sudden and make sure the sheriff gets ahold of that person. I'll hear about it and come back. Take care of your Ma." He jumped

on Muley and rode off. That was the last I seen of my pa.

But no one showed up with money they couldn't explain. I knew Pa hadn't done it. He wouldn't take from someone what they couldn't spare. I saw him help people for nothing plenty of times. For example, nobody with any sense crossed the valley in summer so Pa didn't usually bother watching then, but one day he happened to spot a party going in big slow circles on the salt flats. We took a couple of water skins and rode out.

When we got to the family, they were near dead. They'd missed the last water hole, and their horses had played out. They thought we were angels come for their souls. We tried to put them on Muley and Jack, but they were too weak to stay up. Besides, we were afraid that carrying all five of them in that heat would kill our animals.

Pa had a blanket on the back of his saddle. He stood Muley and Jack side by side with a wide space between and tied one end of the blanket to my saddle and the other end to his. He made the people sit in the shade it cast. They drank some of our water, and Pa poured the rest of it onto them, soaking their clothes. I stayed under the blanket with them while Pa took the empty skins and hiked across the salt flats to the spring for more water.

He made the trip twice that blazing day on foot. His face got so burnt and blistered it looked like a piece of fatback left in the pan too long. I myself like to died just sitting there in the shade.

When night came, we got the three younguns on Muley and their ma and pa on Jack and led them to the spring, where they camped several days till they were strong enough to hike up to the pass and on west. Pa never asked them for nothing, and I saw that man had a gold watch. We coulda just left them in the salt flats and gone home. They'd a been dead by dark and no one ever to know.

So you see Pa wasn't the kind of person to kill a half-crazy old man.

Anyway, I was telling you about Ma, how she changed after Pa left. At first we did all right. Ma never did trust bad fortune not to pounce on her like a panther around some bend in life. So over the years she'd squirmed away a bit of gold when times were good, and now we traded it for food. She and I worked a little on the shaft Pa had started up the canyon. She'd swing the pick, and I'd carry the rock out in a bucket. We didn't come to nothing, though, and soon gave it up. Pa always was a better talker than prospector. And I don't think there was anything to find in that canyon no matter how hard you looked.

You're likely wondering how we ended up in Wore-out Canyon in the first place. Well, when I was a baby, we happened to pass through Cold Spring. Pa got to talking to a prospector in a saloon there. This man said he'd built a nice shack in one of the valley canyons and prospected all over it for six years without luck, and now he was wore out and going back east. So Pa asked him where it was, and he and Ma

decided we might as well move in for a while. We didn't have no place else that was waiting on us to get there.

After Ma and me quit trying to work the mine, there wasn't much I had to do, so I just roamed the canyons: I can tell you every seep and spring that's within a day's walk of our shack. I'd collect dry knots of pinyon pine that had washed down from the mountains and carry them home for firewood. I picked honey mesquite the way the Indians did, let the pods dry, and then pounded them to a paste on a rock mortar. I loved to sit near a seep and listen to the birds. They sure sang sweet, happy to be near water. I liked to see how close I could follow a roadrunner without scaring it. Some I could walk right behind, long as I stopped when they stopped. There was a big chuckwalla lizard that got real tame with me, too. I'd sit in the doorway on full moon nights and watch the kangaroo rats. They'd hop right into my lap if a bobcat passed.

My favorite time was after a rain when the wildflowers bloomed: desert lily and white star, sunray and prince's plume. I bet there's nothing half as pretty in any of your cities.

For a long while we ate pretty regular even after Ma's gold ran out. The Indians brought us pine nuts when they came down from harvesting them in the mountains. We traded our pick to China Bob for a big sack of flour when he lost his pick in a flash flood. He was lucky that was all he lost, Fiddler

Joe was working farther down the same canyon, and he drowned.

Later we traded Jack's saddle, the spade, and a couple of other items we didn't need. When you're hungry, you can do without near about anything that ain't etable.

Ma wouldn't give up Jack. She said he was our way out, though I think she meant my way out if anything happened to her. She didn't trade Pa's rifle either.

Once in a while Fat Mike would come by and set a sack of meal and maybe some bacon on the table. "Miz O'Meara," he'd say, "I'm so dang tired of makin' my own meals I brought my fixin's here in hopes you'd cook me up some supper." Ma'd cook, and I'd see her smile a little. I'd eat so much I felt like a tarantula with a swelled up body and stick legs. After supper he'd always "forget" to take the sack of food along when he left.

But he was mostly working the north end of the valley, and we didn't see him much.

We ran out of things to trade. One day I came home, and Ma was crying. I put my arms around her, and she was like a sack of sharp bones. She used to be soft and comfortable when I hugged her.

The next morning she rode Jack bareback out to an immigrant wagon and swapped them her wedding ring for a small sack of beans, which was all they could spare.

The worst thing was, I'd figured out who killed the Preacher but couldn't see no way to ever prove it.

One afternoon I went up the canyon to set some rabbit snares. When I came home, it was nearly

dark. There was a strange mule by the shack. I ran to the door hoping Pa was back, but it was just some prospector I didn't know.

Ma was standing in the doorway. She handed me a blanket and the rifle. "Magdalena," she said, "you go sleep in the shed tonight."

I heard the prospector ride off before daylight. When I went in the house, Ma had a big chunk of lard melting in the skillet. She was slicing potatoes from a whole sackful there on the floor.

Them fried potatoes were the best thing I ever ate.

One time Fat Mike made a nice little find. He came by and offered to take Ma and me to the railhead at Cold Spring and buy us both a train ticket to wherever her folks were, but she said no.

I think her folks were down in Mexico somewhere, but maybe she didn't know how to get to where they were. Or could be they were all dead, she never talked about them.

Another time some other prospector was there. I was s'pozed to be asleep in the shed, but he was drunk and talking loud. I heard him say to Ma, "You put a dress on that girl and drag a comb through that mess of red hair. Then you take her up to Cold Spring. In no time you'll have yourselves a fancy room in a big fine house. With a feather bed and a servant to fetch your wash water."

I thought it would be exciting to visit Cold Spring and see the stores and buildings and ladies in fine clothes, but I didn't want to live there. I'd asked Fat Mike what

town girls did, and he said they slept till afternoon and sat around the rest of the day entertaining their gentlemen callers. Well, I'd grown up running wild in the canyons, doing pretty much as I pleased with my days, and I didn't like the idea of being indoors all the time and wearing stiff clothes and being nice to people I maybe didn't like. I'd been wearing britches since my old skirt got to where it couldn't be mended any more. Ma cut down an old pair of Pa's so they fit me with a rope belt to hold them up.

Ma never mentioned moving to me, though, so that was all right. Maybe she was afraid to leave, 'cause then how would Pa find us if he came back?

When I was twelve or thirteen, we had a year of drought, and the spring by our house dried up. I had to take Jack to drink at another water hole I knew. I'd fill the water skins, and Jack would carry them home.

The next year—that would be this year—the drought still hung on. All the springs around either went dry or else the water was so brackish it made a person sick to drink it, though it didn't bother Jack. He is one tough horse. Pa named him Jack 'cause he said he was contrary as a mule and near as hard to kill. Me and him get along fine.

Just about everybody left the valley. There was one seep I knew of that still gave enough sweet water for Ma and me to drink, but it wasn't going to last long.

Ma got real weak, and she'd just

lie on the bed all day. I'd sit in the doorway and stare up at the mountains at the white patches that were snow. I'd always been curious about snow and had worn people out asking questions about it. They said it was kind of solid but soft, like thick mud, and cold.

And they said if you put snow in a bucket over a fire it turned to water.

One morning I got the rope I used as a bridle (we'd traded the leather one long ago) and threw my blanket and all our empty water skins on Jack. I left the last full skin with Ma. She lay there too tired to ask where I was going.

I hopped on Jack and headed across the salt flats. On the other side I gave him a long drink at the spring and filled a skin with the bad water in case I had no choice but to drink it. Then I started up the trail to Dead Dog Pass, where I hoped to find snow.

I rode till sundown, drank some of the brackish water from the skin, and wrapped up in my blanket.

I never felt cold like that night. I shivered so much I thought my bones would break. I didn't make a fire 'cause I was saving my matches to melt snow. I couldn't sleep at all, and before daybreak I climbed on Jack and set off up the mountain. It stayed cold even after the sun rose, which puzzled me. I'm used to chilly nights in the canyon, but how could the day be cold with the sun shining?

I'd brought along some rabbit jerky I got from a Shoshone and chewed on that half the morning.

The white peaks looked no closer. I began to doubt I'd find snow at the pass. I didn't know if I could bear another night of such cold. I decided if there wasn't snow at the pass I'd ride on to Cold Spring for water. I have to admit I was scared to go into town.

I let Jack take a breather and opened the water skin wide for him to drink. I started to roam around out of habit.

I climbed up a side wash a ways and stopped to watch some cactus wrens. They were twittering and hopping around on the rock wall above me. I began to notice more birds off to the side like they were wanting to come closer and waiting for me to leave. I didn't see why they'd all be so anxious to visit a bare rock cliff, so I sat a while and watched.

Pretty soon I realized the cliff had a break in it partway up and probably had a ledge there out of sight. I hiked up my britches and clambered up.

There was a ledge, and it had a deep basin in it. I don't know if the Indians cut it or if it was natural, what Ma would call a *tinaja*.

The basin was full of clear water, which I didn't understand 'cause rain should have evaporated long ago. I put my lips to the pool. It was cold and sweet.

I felt around with my hand, and against the cliff I found where a tiny spring seeped in.

As I was climbing down, a speck of color caught my eye, down in a split in the rock. I dug for it with my jackknife and pulled out a leather packet.

There was a pretty design set into it with red porcupine quills.

I knew what was inside right away. That salamander shape showed plain as a July sunrise right through the doeskin.

I took the water skins and filled them, let Jack drink all he could from the skins, and filled them again to carry home. I figured the skins held two weeks' worth of water for Ma and me. If the drought didn't break before we emptied them, I could come for more.

But I left the skins there by the trail to pick up on my way back. I knew I couldn't go home yet. I had to ride on in here to Cold Spring and tell you what I found by the basin.

If Pa stole the nugget and ran off with it, why's it here in Fiddler Joe's bag? You can tell it's been in there for years; the leather's taken on the salamander shape.

I smelled pine when Pa and me found the Preacher. I didn't think about it till later, that no pines grow down on the desert floor, so

what I smelled had to be turpentine. After he killed the Preacher, Joe thought he'd better store the nugget safe in his leather packet. He took out the turpentine bottle and stuck it in a pocket to make room for the gold. Maybe he used some on his fingers. The resin smell lingered in the air. Turpentine would have gotten on the mallet handle, too, when he held it in his hands. The smell was gone by the time you got there.

Fiddler Joe must have stolen the mallet the night before when he left our place. He was planning murder while he fiddled for his friends.

He was smart enough to know he couldn't sell the nugget right off. He probably found the basin by chance, just like I did, going up the trail on one of his trips to town. He hid the nugget there but drowned before he could come back.

So, sheriff, I hope you will see that word gets around about who really killed the Preacher.

And someday Pa will hear about it wherever he is and come home.

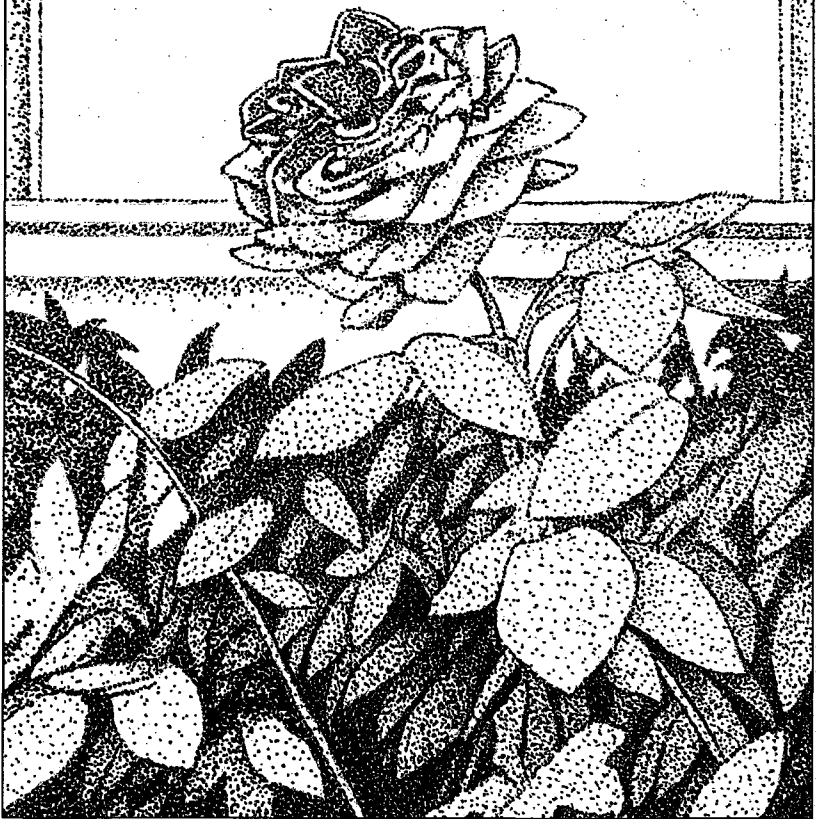
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MYSTERY CLASSIC

# THE WIND IN THE ROSE BUSH

Mary Wilkins Freeman



*Illustration by David Monette*

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**F**ord Village has no railroad station, being on the other side of the river from Porter's Falls and accessible only by the ford which gives it its name and a ferry line.

The ferry boat was waiting when Rebecca Flint got off the train with her bag and lunch basket. When she and her small trunk were safely embarked, she sat stiff and straight and calm in the ferry boat as it shot swiftly and smoothly across stream. There was a horse attached to a light country wagon on board, and he pawed the deck uneasily. His owner stood near with a wary eye upon him, although he was chewing with as dully reflective an expression as a cow. Beside Rebecca sat a woman of about her own age who kept looking at her with furtive curiosity; her husband, short and stout and saturnine, stood near her. Rebecca paid no attention to either of them. She was tall and spare and pale, the type of a spinster, yet with rudimentary lines and expressions of matronhood. She all unconsciously held her shawl, rolled up in a canvas bag, on her left hip as if it had been a child. She wore a settled frown of dissent at life, but it was the frown of a mother who regarded life as a froward child rather than as an overwhelming fate.

The other woman continued staring at her; she was mildly stupid, except for an overdeveloped curiosity which made her at times sharp beyond belief. Her eyes glittered, red spots came on her flaccid cheeks; she kept opening her mouth to speak, making little abortive motions. Finally she could endure it no longer; she nudged Rebecca boldly.

"A pleasant day," said she.

Rebecca looked at her and nodded coldly. "Yes, very," she assented.

"Have you come far?"

"I have come from Michigan."

"Oh!" said the woman with awe. "It's a long way," she remarked presently.

"Yes, it is," replied Rebecca conclusively.

Still the other woman was not daunted; there was something which she determined to know, possibly roused thereto by a vague sense of incongruity in the other's appearance. "It's a long ways to come and leave a family," she remarked with painful slyness.

"I ain't got any family to leave," returned Rebecca shortly.

"Then you ain't . . ."

"No, I ain't."

"Oh!" said the woman.

Rebecca looked straight ahead at the race of the river.

It was a long ferry. Finally Rebecca herself waxed unexpectedly loquacious. She turned to the other woman and inquired if she knew John Dent's widow who lived in Ford Village. "Her husband died about three years ago," said she by way of detail.

The woman started violently. She turned pale, then she flushed; she cast a strange glance at her husband, who was regarding both women with a sort of stolid keenness.

"Yes, I guess I do," faltered the woman finally.

"Well, his first wife was my sister," said Rebecca with the air of one imparting important intelligence.

"Was she?" responded the other woman feebly. She glanced at her husband with an expression of doubt and terror, and he shook his head forbiddingly.

"I'm going to see her and take my niece Agnes home with me," said Rebecca.

Then the woman gave such a violent start that she noticed it.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

"Nothin', I guess," replied the woman with eyes on her husband, who was slowly shaking his head like a Chinese toy.

"Is my niece sick?" asked Rebecca with quick suspicion.

"No, she ain't sick," replied the woman with alacrity; then she caught her breath again.

"She ought to have grown up real pretty if she takes after my sister. She was a real pretty woman," Rebecca said wistfully.

"Yes, I guess she did grow up pretty," replied the woman in a trembling voice.

"What kind of a woman is the second wife?"

The woman glanced at her husband's warning face. She continued to gaze at him while she replied in a choking voice to Rebecca:

"I—guess she's a nice woman," she replied. "I—don't know, I—guess so. I—don't see much of her."

"I felt kind of hurt that John married again so quick," said Rebecca, "but I suppose he wanted his house kept, and Agnes wanted care. I wasn't so situated that I could take her when her mother died. I had my own mother to care for, and I was schoolteaching. Now Mother has gone, and my uncle died six months ago and left me quite a little property, and I've come for Agnes. I guess she'll be glad to go with me, though I suppose her stepmother is a good woman and has always done for her."

The man's warning shake at his wife was fairly portentous.

"I guess so," said she.

"John always wrote that she was a beautiful woman," said Rebecca.

Then the ferry boat grated on the shore.

John Dent's widow had sent a horse and wagon to meet her sister-in-law. When the woman and her husband went down the road, on which Rebecca in the wagon with her trunk soon passed them, she said reproachfully, "Seems as if I'd ought to have told her, Thomas."

"Let her find it out herself," replied the man. "Don't you go to burnin' your fingers in other folks' pudding Maria."

"Do you s'pose she'll see anything?" asked the woman with a spasmodic shudder and a terrified roll of her eyes.

"See!" returned her husband with stolid scorn. "Better be sure there's anything to see."

"Oh, Thomas, they say . . ."

"Lord, ain't you found out that what they say is mostly lies?"

"But if it should be true, and she's a nervous woman, she might be scared enough to lose her wits," said his wife, staring uneasily after Rebecca's erect figure in the wagon disappearing over the crest of the hilly road.

"Wits that so easy upset ain't worth much," declared the man. "You keep out of it, Maria!"

Rebecca in the meantime rode on in the wagon beside a flaxen-headed boy who looked, to her understanding, not very bright. She asked him a question, and he paid no attention. She repeated it, and he responded with a bewildered and incoherent grunt. Then she let him alone, after making sure that he knew how to drive straight.

They had traveled about half a mile, passed the village square, and gone a short distance beyond, when the boy drew up with a sudden *whoa!* before a very prosperous-looking house. It had been one of the aboriginal cottages of the vicinity, small and white with a roof extending on one side over a piazza, and a tiny "L" jutting out in the rear on the right hand. Now the cottage was transformed by dormer windows, a bay window on the piazzaless side, a carved railing down the front steps, and a modern hardwood door.

"Is this John Dent's house?" asked Rebecca.

The boy was as sparing of speech as a philosopher. His only response was in flinging the reins over the horse's back, stretching out one foot to the shaft, and leaping out of the wagon, then going around to the rear for the trunk. Rebecca got out and went toward the house. Its white paint had a new gloss; its blinds were an immaculate apple green; the lawn was trimmed as smooth as velvet, and it was dotted with scrupulous groups of hydrangeas and cannas.

"I always understood that John Dent was well-to-do," Rebecca reflected comfortably. "I guess Agnes will have considerable. I've got enough, but it will come in handy for her schooling. She can have advantages."

The boy dragged the trunk up the fine gravel-walk, but before he reached the steps leading up to the piazza, for the house stood on a terrace, the front door opened and a fair, frizzled head of a very large and handsome woman appeared. She held up her black silk skirt, disclosing voluminous ruffles of starched embroidery, and waited for Rebec-

ca. She smiled placidly, her pink double-chinned face widened and dimpled, but her blue eyes were wary and calculating. She extended her hand as Rebecca climbed the steps.

"This is Miss Flint, I suppose," said she.

"Yes, ma'am," replied Rebecca, noticing with bewilderment a curious expression compounded of fear and defiance on the other's face.

"Your letter only arrived this morning," said Mrs. Dent in a steady voice. Her great face was a uniform pink, and her china-blue eyes were at once aggressive and veiled with secrecy.

"Yes, I hardly thought you'd get my letter," replied Rebecca. "I felt as if I could not wait to hear from you before I came. I supposed you would be so situated that you could have me a little while without putting you out too much, from what John used to write me about his circumstances, and when I had that money so unexpected, I felt as if I must come for Agnes. I suppose you will be willing to give her up. You know she's my own blood, and of course she's no relation to you, though you must have got attached to her. I know from her picture what a sweet girl she must be, and John always said she looked like her own mother, and Grace was a beautiful woman, if she was my sister."

Rebecca stopped and stared at the other woman in amazement and alarm. The great handsome blonde creature stood speechless, livid, gasping, with her hand to her heart, her lips parted in a horrible caricature of a smile. "Are you sick!" cried Rebecca, drawing near. "Don't you want me to get you some water!"

Then Mrs. Dent recovered herself with a great effort. "It is nothing," she said. "I am subject to—spells. I am over it now. Won't you come in, Miss Flint?"

As she spoke, the beautiful deep rose color suffused her face; her blue eyes met her visitor's with the opaqueness of turquoise—with a revelation of blue but a concealment of all behind.

Rebecca followed her hostess in, and the boy, who had waited quietly, climbed the steps with the trunk. But before they entered the door a strange thing happened. On the upper terrace, close to the piazza post, grew a great rose bush, and on it, late in the season though it was, one small red perfect rose.

Rebecca looked at it, and the other woman extended her hand with a quick gesture. "Don't you pick that rose!" she brusquely cried.

Rebecca drew herself up with stiff dignity. "I ain't in the habit of picking other folks' roses without leave," said she.

As Rebecca spoke, she started violently and lost sight of her resentment, for something singular happened. Suddenly the rose bush was agitated violently as if by a gust of wind, yet it was a remarkably still day. Not a leaf of the hydrangea standing on the terrace close to the rose trembled.

"What on earth . . ." began Rebecca; then she stopped with a gasp at the sight of the other woman's face. Although a face, it gave somehow the impression of a desperately clutched hand of secrecy.

"Come in!" said she in a harsh voice which seemed to come forth from her chest with no intervention of the organs of speech. "Come in to the house. I'm getting cold out here."

"What makes that rose bush blow so when there isn't any wind?" asked Rebecca, trembling with vague horror yet resolute.

"I don't see as it is blowing," returned the woman calmly. And as she spoke, indeed the bush was quiet.

"It *was* blowing," declared Rebecca.

"It isn't now," said Mrs. Dent. "I can't try to account for everything that blows as out-of-doors. I have too much to do."

She spoke scornfully and confidently, with defiant, unflinching eyes, first on the bush, then on Rebecca, and led the way into the house.

"It looked queer," persisted Rebecca, but she followed, and also the boy with the trunk.

Rebecca entered an interior, prosperous, even elegant, according to her simple ideas. There were Brussels carpets, lace curtains, and plenty of brilliant upholstery and polished wood. "You're real nicely situated," remarked Rebecca, after she had become a little accustomed to her new surroundings and the two women were seated at the tea table.

Mrs. Dent stared with a hard complacency from behind her silver-plated service. "Yes, I be," said she.

"You got all the things new?" said Rebecca hesitatingly, with a jealous memory of her dead sister's bridal furnishings.

"Yes," said Mrs. Dent. "I was never one to want dead folks' things, and I had money enough of my own so I wasn't beholden to John. I had the old duds put up at auction. They didn't bring much."

"I suppose you saved some for Agnes. She'll want some of her poor mother's things when she is grown up," said Rebecca with some indignation.

The defiant stare of Mrs. Dent's blue eyes waxed more intense. "There's a few things up garret," said she.

"She'll be liked to value them," remarked Rebecca. As she spoke, she glanced at the window. "Isn't it most time for her to be coming home?" she asked.

"Most time," answered Mrs. Dent carelessly, "but when she gets over to Addie Slocum's, she never knows when to come home."

"Is Addie Slocum her intimate friend?"

"Intimate as any."

"Maybe we can have her come out to see Agnes when she's living with me," said Rebecca wistfully. "I suppose she'll be likely to be homesick at first."



"Most likely," answered Mrs. Dent.

"Does she call you mother?" Rebecca asked.

"No, she calls me Aunt Emeline," replied the other woman shortly. "When did you say you were going home?"

"In about a week, I thought, if she can be ready to go so soon," answered Rebecca with a surprised look.

She reflected that she would not remain a day longer than she could help after such an inhospitable look and question.

"Oh, as far as that goes," said Mrs. Dent, "it wouldn't make any difference about her being ready. You could go home whenever you felt that you must, and she could come afterward."

"Alone?"

"Why not? She's a big girl now, and you don't have to change cars."

"My niece will go home when I do and not travel alone, and if I can't wait here for her, in the house that used to be her mother's and my sister's home, I'll go and board somewhere," returned Rebecca with warmth.

"Oh, you can stay here as long as you want to. You're welcome," said Mrs. Dent.

Then Rebecca started. "There she is!" she declared in a trembling, exultant voice. Nobody knew how she longed to see the girl.

"She isn't as late as I thought she'd be," said Mrs. Dent, and again that curious, subtle change passed over her face, and again it settled into that stony impassiveness.

Rebecca stared at the door, waiting for it to open. "Where is she?" she asked presently.

"I guess she's stopped to take off her hat in the entry," suggested Mrs. Dent.

Rebecca waited. "Why don't she come? It can't take her all this time to take off her hat."

For answer Mrs. Dent rose with a stiff jerk and threw open the door.

"Agnes!" she called. "Agnes!" Then she turned and eyed Rebecca. "She ain't there."

"I saw her pass the window," said Rebecca in bewilderment.

"You must have been mistaken."

"I know I did," persisted Rebecca.

"You couldn't have."

"I did. I saw first a shadow go over the ceiling, then I saw her in the glass there"—she pointed to a mirror over the sideboard opposite—"and then the shadow passed the window."

"How did she look in the glass?"

"Little and light-haired, with the light hair kind of tossing over her forehead."

"You couldn't have seen her."

"Was that like Agnes?"

"Like enough, but of course you didn't see her. You've been thinking so much about her that you thought you did."

"You thought *you* did."

"I thought I saw a shadow pass the window, but I must have been mistaken. She didn't come in, or we would have seen her before now. I knew it was too early for her to get home from Addie Slocum's anyhow."

When Rebecca went to bed, Agnes had not returned. Rebecca had resolved that she would not retire until the girl came, but she was very tired and she reasoned with herself that she was foolish. Besides, Mrs. Dent suggested that Agnes might go to the church social with Addie Slocum. When Rebecca suggested that she be sent for and told that her aunt had come, Mrs. Dent laughed meaningly.

"I guess you'll find out that a young girl ain't so ready to leave a sociable, where there's boys, to see her aunt," said she.

"She's too young," said Rebecca incredulously and indignantly.

"She's sixteen," replied Mrs. Dent, "and she's always been great for the boys."

"She's going to school four years after I get her before she thinks of boys," declared Rebecca.

"We'll see," laughed the other woman.

After Rebecca went to bed, she lay awake a long time listening for the sound of girlish laughter and a boy's voice under her window; then she fell asleep.

The next morning she was down early. Mrs. Dent, who kept no servants, was busily preparing breakfast.

"Don't Agnes help you about breakfast?" asked Rebecca.

"No, I let her lay," replied Mrs. Dent shortly.

"What time did she get home last night?"

"She didn't get home. She stayed with Addie. She often does."

"Without sending you word?"

"Oh, she knew I wouldn't worry."

"When will she be home?"

"Oh, I guess she'll be along pretty soon."

Rebecca was uneasy, but she tried to conceal it, for she knew of no good reason for uneasiness. What was there to occasion alarm in the fact of one young girl staying overnight with another? She could not eat much breakfast. Afterward she went out on the little piazza, although her hostess strove furtively to stop her.

"Why don't you go out back of the house? It's real pretty—a view over the river," she said.

"I guess I'll go out here," replied Rebecca. She had a purpose: to watch for the absent girl.

Presently Rebecca came hustling into the house through the sitting room, into the kitchen where Mrs. Dent was cooking.

"That rose bush!" she gasped.

Mrs. Dent turned and faced her.

"What of it?"

"It's a-blowing."

"What of it?"

"There isn't a mite of wind this morning."

Mrs. Dent turned with an inimitable toss of her fair head. "If you think I can spend my time puzzling over such nonsense as . . ." she began, but Rebecca interrupted her with a cry and a rush to the door.

"There she is now!" she cried.

She flung the door wide open, and curiously enough a breeze came in and her own gray hair tossed and a paper blew off the table to the floor with a loud rustle, but there was nobody in sight.

"There's nobody here," Rebecca said.

She looked blankly at the other woman, who brought her rolling pin down on a slab of piecrust with a thud.

"I didn't hear anybody," she said calmly.

*"I saw somebody pass that window!"*

"You were mistaken again."

*"I know I saw somebody."*

"You couldn't have. Please shut that door."

Rebecca shut the door. She sat down beside the window and looked out on the autumnal yard, with its little curve of footpath to the kitchen door. "What smells so strong of roses in this room?" she said presently.

She sniffed hard.

"I don't smell anything but these nutmegs."

"It is not nutmeg."

"I don't smell anything else."

"Where do you suppose Agnes is?"

"Oh, perhaps she has gone over the ferry to Porter's Falls with Addie. She often does. Addie's got an aunt over there, and Addie's got a cousin, a real pretty boy."

"You suppose she's gone over there?"

"Mebbe. I shouldn't wonder."

"When should she be home?"

"Oh, not before afternoon."

Rebecca waited with all the patience she could muster. She kept reassuring herself, telling herself that it was all natural, that the other woman could not help it, but she made up her mind that if Agnes did not return that afternoon she should be sent for.

When it was four o'clock, she started up with resolution. She had

been furtively watching the onyx clock on the sitting room mantel; she had timed herself. She had said that if Agnes was not home by that time she should demand that she be sent for. She rose and stood before Mrs. Dent, who looked up coolly from her embroidery.

"I've waited just as long as I'm going to," she said. "I've come 'way from Michigan to see my own sister's daughter and take her home with me. I've been here ever since yesterday—twenty-four hours—and I haven't seen her. Now I'm going to. I want her sent for."

Mrs. Dent folded her embroidery and rose.

"Well, I don't blame you," she said. "It is high time she came home. I'll go right over and get her myself."

Rebecca heaved a sigh of relief. She hardly knew what she had suspected or feared, but she knew that her position had been one of antagonism if not accusation, and she was sensible of relief.

"I wish you would," she said gratefully and went back to her chair while Mrs. Dent got her shawl and her little white head tie. "I wouldn't trouble you, but I do feel as if I couldn't wait any longer to see her," she remarked apologetically.

"Oh, it ain't any trouble at all," said Mrs. Dent as she went out. "I don't blame you; you have waited long enough."

Rebecca sat at the window watching breathlessly until Mrs. Dent came stepping through the yard alone. She ran to the door and saw, hardly noticing it this time, that the rose bush was again violently agitated yet with no wind evident elsewhere.

"Where is she?" she cried.

Mrs. Dent laughed with stiff lips as she came up the steps over the terrace.

"Girls will be girls," said she. "She's gone with Addie to Lincoln. Addie's got an uncle who's conductor on the train, and lives there, and he got 'em passes, and they're goin' to stay to Addie's Aunt Margaret's a few days. Mrs. Slocum said Agnes didn't have time to come over and ask me before the train went, but she took it on herself to say it would be all right, and . . ."

"Why hadn't she been over to tell you?" Rebecca was angry though not suspicious. She even saw no reason for her anger.

"Oh, she was putting up grapes. She was coming over just as soon as she got the black off her hands. She heard I had company, and her hands were a sight. She was holding them over sulphur matches."

"You say she's going to stay a few days?" repeated Rebecca dazedly.

"Yes, till Thursday Mrs. Slocum said."

"How far is Lincoln from here?"

"About fifty miles. It'll be a real treat to her. Mrs. Slocum's sister is a real nice woman."

"It is goin' to make it pretty late about my goin' home."

"If you don't feel as if you could wait, I'll get her ready and send her on just as soon as I can," Mrs. Dent said sweetly.

"I'm going to wait," said Rebecca grimly.

The two women sat down again, and Mrs. Dent took up her embroidery. "Is there any sewing I can do for her?" Rebecca asked finally in a desperate way. "If I can get her sewing along some . . ."

Mrs. Dent arose with alacrity and fetched a mass of white from the closet. "Here," she said, "if you want to sew the lace on this nightgown. I was going to put her to it, but she'll be glad enough to get rid of it. She ought to have this and one more before she goes. I don't like to send her away without some good underclothing."

Rebecca snatched at the little white garment and sewed feverishly.

That night she wakened from a deep sleep a little after midnight and lay a minute trying to collect her faculties and explain to herself what she was listening to. At last she discovered that it was the then popular strains of "The Maiden's Prayer" floating up through the floor from the piano in the sitting room below. She jumped up, threw a shawl over her nightgown, and hurried downstairs trembling. There was nobody in the sitting room; the piano was silent. She ran to Mrs. Dent's bedroom and called hysterically, "Emeline! Emeline!"

"What is it?" asked Mrs. Dent's voice from the bed. The voice was stern but had a note of consciousness in it.

"Who—who was that playing 'The Maiden's Prayer' in the sitting room on the piano?"

"I didn't hear anybody."

"There was someone."

"I didn't hear anything."

"I tell you there was someone. But—*there ain't anybody there.*"

"I didn't hear anything."

"I did—somebody playing 'The Maiden's Prayer' on the piano. Has Agnes got home? I want to know."

"Of course Agnes hasn't got home," answered Mrs. Dent with rising inflection. "Be you gone crazy over that girl? The last boat from Porter's Falls was in before we went to bed. Of course she ain't come."

"I heard . . ."

"You were dreaming."

"I wasn't; I was broad awake." Rebecca went back to her chamber and kept her lamp burning all night.

The next morning her eyes upon Mrs. Dent were wary and blazing with suppressed excitement. She kept opening her mouth as if to speak, then frowning, and setting her lips hard. After breakfast she went upstairs and came down presently with her coat and bonnet.

"Now, Emeline," she said, "I want to know where the Slocums live."

Mrs. Dent gave a strange, long, half-lidded glance at her. She was finishing her coffee.

"Why?" she asked.

"I'm going over there and find out if they have heard anything from her daughter and Agnes since they went away. I don't like what I heard last night."

"You must have been dreaming."

"It don't make any odds whether I was or not. Does she play 'The Maiden's Prayer' on the piano? I want to know."

"What if she does? She plays it a little, I believe. I don't know. She don't half play it anyhow; she ain't got an ear."

"That wasn't half played last night. I don't like such things happening. I ain't superstitious, but I don't like it. I'm going. Where do the Slocums live?"

"You go down the road over the bridge past the old grist mill, then you turn to the left; it's the only house for half a mile. You can't miss it. It has a barn with a ship in full sail on the cupola."

"Well, I'm going. I don't feel easy."

About two hours later Rebecca returned. There were red spots on her cheeks. She looked wild. "I've been there," she said, "and there isn't a soul at home. Something *has* happened."

"What has happened?"

"I don't know. Something. I had a warning last night. There wasn't a soul there. They've been sent for to Lincoln."

"Did you see anybody to ask?" asked Mrs. Dent with thinly concealed anxiety.

"I asked the woman that lives on the turn of the road. She's stone deaf. I suppose you know. She listened while I screamed at her to know where the Slocums were, and then she said, 'Mrs. Smith don't live here.' I didn't see anybody on the road, and that's the only house. What do you suppose it means?"

"I don't suppose it means much of anything," replied Mrs. Dent coolly. "Mr. Slocum is conductor on the railroad, and he'd be away anyway, and Mrs. Slocum often goes early when he does, to spend the day with her sister in Porter's Falls. She'd be more likely to go away than Ad-die."

"And you don't think anything has happened?" Rebecca asked with diminishing distrust before the reasonableness of it.

"Land, no!"

Rebecca went upstairs to lay aside her coat and bonnet. But she came hurrying back with them still on.

"Who's been in my room?" she gasped. Her face was pale as ashes.



Mrs. Dent also paled as she regarded her.

"What do you mean?" she asked slowly.

"I found when I went upstairs that—little nightgown of—Agnes's on—the bed, laid out. It was—laid out. The sleeves were folded across the bosom, and there was that little rose between them. Emeline, what is it? Emeline, what's the matter? Oh!"

Mrs. Dent was struggling for breath in great, choking gasps. She clung to the back of a chair. Rebecca, trembling herself so she could scarcely keep on her feet, got her some water.

As soon as she recovered herself, Mrs. Dent regarded her with eyes full of the strangest mixture of fear and horror and hostility.

"What do you mean talking so?" she said in a hard voice.

"It is *there*."

"Nonsense. You threw it down and it fell that way."

"It was folded in my bureau drawer."

"It couldn't have been."

"Who picked that red rose?"

"Look at the bush," Mrs. Dent replied shortly.

Rebecca looked at her; her mouth gaped. She hurried out of the room. When she came back, her eyes seemed to protrude. (She had in the meantime hastened upstairs, and come down with tottering steps, clinging to the banisters.)

"Now, I want to know what all this means," she demanded.

"What what means?"

"The rose is on the bush, and it's gone from the bed in my room! Is this house haunted, or what?"

"I don't know anything about a house being haunted. I don't believe in such things. Be you crazy?" Mrs. Dent spoke with gathering force. The color flashed back to her cheeks.

"No," said Rebecca shortly. "I ain't crazy yet, but I shall be if this keeps on much longer. I'm going to find out where that girl is before night."

Mrs. Dent eyed her.

"What be you going to do?"

"I'm going to Lincoln."

A faint triumphant smile overspread Mrs. Dent's large face.

"You can't," said she; "there ain't any train."

"No train?"

"No; there ain't any afternoon train from the Falls to Lincoln."

"Then I'm going over to the Slocums' again tonight."

However, Rebecca did not go; such a rain came up as deterred even her resolution, and she had only her best dresses with her. Then in the evening came the letter from the Michigan village which she had left nearly a week ago. It was from her cousin, a single woman, who had

come to keep her house while she was away. It was a pleasant unexciting letter enough, all the first of it, and related mostly how she missed Rebecca; how she hoped she was having pleasant weather and kept her health; and how her friend, Mrs. Greenaway, had come to stay with her since she had felt lonesome the first night in the house; how she hoped Rebecca would have no objections to this although nothing had been said about it, since she had not realized that she might be nervous alone. The cousin was painfully conscientious; hence the letter. Rebecca smiled in spite of her disturbed mind as she read it; then her eye caught the postscript. That was in a different hand, purporting to be written by the friend, Mrs. Hannah Greenaway, informing her that the cousin had fallen down the cellar stairs and broken her hip and was in a dangerous condition, and begging Rebecca to return at once, as she herself was rheumatic and unable to nurse her properly and no one else could be obtained.

Rebecca looked at Mrs. Dent, who had come to her room with the letter quite late; it was half-past nine, and she had gone upstairs for the night.

"Where did this come from?" she asked.

"Mr. Amblecrom brought it," she replied.

"Who's he?"

"The postmaster. He often brings the letters that come on the late mail. He knows I ain't anybody to send. He brought yours about your coming. He said he and his wife came over on the ferry boat with you."

"I remember him," Rebecca replied shortly. "There's bad news in this letter."

Mrs. Dent's face took on an expression of serious inquiry.

"Yes, my Cousin Harriet has fallen down the cellar stairs—they were always dangerous—and she's broken her hip, and I've got to take the first train home tomorrow."

"You don't say so. I'm dreadfully sorry."

"No, you ain't sorry!" said Rebecca, with a look as if she leaped. "You're glad. I don't know why, but you're glad. You're glad. You've wanted to get rid of me for some reason ever since I came. I don't know why. You're a strange woman. Now you've got your way, and I hope you're satisfied."

"How you talk."

Mrs. Dent spoke in a faintly injured voice, but there was a light in her eyes.

"I talk the way it is. Well, I'm going tomorrow morning, and I want you, just as soon as Agnes Dent comes home, to send her out to me. Don't you wait for anything. You pack what clothes she's got, and don't wait even to mend them, and you buy her ticket. I'll leave money, and you send her along. She don't have to change cars. You start her off, when she gets home, on the next train!"

"Very well," replied the other woman. She had an expression of covert amusement.

"Mind you do it."

"Very well, Rebecca."

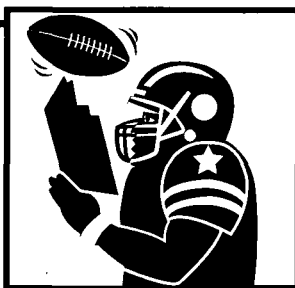
Rebecca started on her journey the next morning. When she arrived two days later, she found her cousin in perfect health. She found, moreover, that the friend had not written the postscript in the cousin's letter. Rebecca would have returned to Ford Village the next morning, but the fatigue and nervous strain had been too much for her. She was not able to move from her bed. She had a species of low fever induced by anxiety and fatigue. But she could write, and she did, to the Slocums, and she received no answer. She also wrote to Mrs. Dent; she even sent numerous telegrams, with no response. Finally she wrote to the postmaster, and an answer arrived by the first possible mail. The letter was short, curt, and to the purpose. Mr. Amblecrom, the postmaster, was a man of few words, and especially wary as to his expressions in a letter.

*"Dear madam," he wrote, "Your favor rec'd. No Slocums in Ford Village. All dead. Addie ten years ago, her mother two years later, her father five. House vacant. Mrs. John Dent said to have neglected stepdaughter. Girl was sick. Medicine not given. Talk of taking action. Not enough evidence. House said to be haunted. Strange sights and sounds. Your niece, Agnes Dent, died a year ago, about this time.*

*"Yours truly,  
"Thomas Amblecrom"*

# BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon



**M**arcia Talley's heroine, Hannah Ives, describes herself as "born stressed." Maybe so, but in **Sing It to Her Bones** (Dell, \$5.99) she has some very good reasons to be wound tightly. She's estranged from her grown daughter, she's recovering from breast cancer, she has just lost her job, and her academic husband is on suspension following a coed's accusation of sexual harassment. So Hannah heads to her sister-in-law's country place near Chesapeake Bay to spend a few days away from it all, only to stumble over the corpse of a local girl who disappeared almost a decade earlier. Talley packs this 1998 Malice Domestic Grant winner with a lot of emotional wallop as her sympathetic sleuth digs up local dirt to find a murderer lurking under one of the stones.

Linda Barnes' Boston private eye Carlotta Carlisle returns in a fast-paced adventure titled **Flashpoint** (Hyperion, \$22.95). At the request of one of her volleyball teammates, Carlotta visits an irascible old woman who has suddenly become paranoid about being burglarized, hinting that she has some treasure that she must protect. Carlotta puts it down to eccentricity—until she discovers the old woman murdered in her ransacked apartment. Now it's personal, which means that Carlotta has jumped in a pool already inhabited by a couple of sharks hunting the treasure for themselves. As always, Barnes writes with verve and style, making time with Carlotta well spent.

Like Patricia Cornwell's heroine, Eve Duncan in Iris Johansen's **The Killing Game** (Bantam, \$23.95) works in forensics. Eve, however, specializes in forensic sculpture, recreating the faces of skeletal victims so that identification is possible. This case involves the skeleton of a young girl that may prove to be Eve's own kidnapped and murdered child, the tragedy nine years earlier that pushed the bereft young mother into this field with a crusade to help parents identify the remains of missing children. One thing is certain already: There's a dangerous serial killer out there, and torturing Eve is his latest entertainment. Cornwell explores the technical aspects of murder investigation, but Johansen

explores the emotional ones, especially the relationship between Eve and her best friend, the homicide cop who investigated her daughter's case.

Lee Child's hero, former MP Jack Reacher, and new novel, **Tripwire** (Putnam, \$23.95), won't disappoint readers looking for impressive displays of resourcefulness, stamina, and gumption. The nonstop adventure begins in Key West, where Reacher has drifted into two jobs and a makeshift life after his military retirement. When a P.I. comes looking for him and winds up brutally murdered, Reacher must detach himself from the sinister net that has inexplicably tightened around him. The trail quickly leads to the beautiful daughter of Reacher's mentor, and thus begins a thrilling chase as Reacher and the woman try to elude a psychopath who's planned his last, and biggest, scam. This one isn't for the squeamish or faint of heart, but it will please readers who like watching a tough guy come through some very tough spots with grace and humor.

Tony Hillerman fans need few words of encouragement from me. I need only mention that **The First Eagle** (HarperCollins, \$6.99) is now available in paperback. If there's anyone out there who hasn't discovered this outstanding series featuring Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee, two very different yet equally engaging Navajo Tribal policemen, run to your nearest bookstore and load up. Hillerman has been entertaining readers with more than a dozen books in his award-winning series, and he certainly hasn't lost his touch.

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### SOLUTION TO THE OCTOBER "UNSOLVED":

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Cora Jarvis, who lived in the southernmost house, was killed by Bert O'Hara.

	NAME	PET	HOUSE	INSTRUMENT
NORTH				
1	Ellen Lagler	fox	orange	organ
2	Dan Katz	cat	brown	harp
3	Alice McNutt	anteater	red	flute
4	Fred Parker	dog	blue	piano
5	Gina Newman	goose	yellow	cello
6	Bert O'Hara	badger	white	saxophone
7	Cora Jarvis	hamster	green	guitar
SOUTH				

# THE STORY THAT WON

The May Mysterious Photograph contest was won by J. F. Peirce of Bryan, Texas. Honorable mentions go to Jack Kean of Starkville, Mississippi; Bonnie Guetlech of Shippensburg, Pennsylvania; James Hagerty of Melbourne, Florida; Pauline Stankiewicz of Mountain-side, New Jersey; Mark Truman of



Tustin, California; Barbara R. Aiello of Oak Harbor, Washington; Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; Elizabeth McEntee of Manassas, Virginia; C. T. Landry of LaPlace, Louisiana; Claire Berke of Waterloo, New York; Price Williams of Ft. Lauderdale, Florida; and Mitchell D. Earp of Jay, Oklahoma.

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## OUT ON A LIMB by J. F. Peirce

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After Mother traced her lineage, I expressed an interest in tracing Father's.

Without saying a word, Mother went up to the attic and brought down a photo album that I'd never before seen of Father's family. Finding the picture she was looking for, she passed the album to me and said disdainfully, "Those are your great-uncles, Tom and Jerry, playing leapfrog."

"I'm amazed that an old man could leap so high," I said.

"They were both in their twenties when that picture was taken."

"But one has a white mustache; the other, gray hair," I protested.

"They dyed their hair and mustaches to make themselves look old. They performed as gymnasts in vaudeville but couldn't make a living at it, so they dyed and reincarnated themselves. As snake-oil salesmen."

"Snake-oil salesmen?"

"They sold bottles of colored water labeled The Elixir of Youth, which they claimed could work wonders, even restore a man's virility."

"Like Viagra?"

Mother nodded. "To sell their elixir, they played leapfrog, leaping impossibly high to demonstrate their strength and agility. They were con artists, and but two of the apes hanging from the limbs of your father's family tree. Do you still want to look up it?"

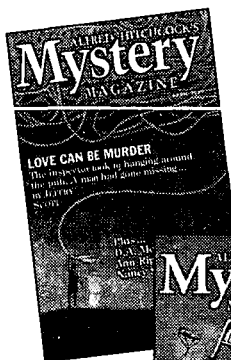
"More than ever," I teased. "Who knows, I might find a prince at its top. A frog prince!"



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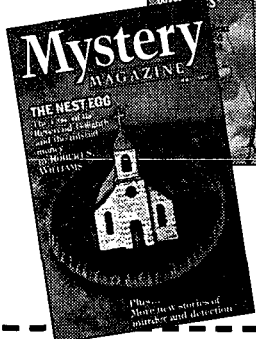
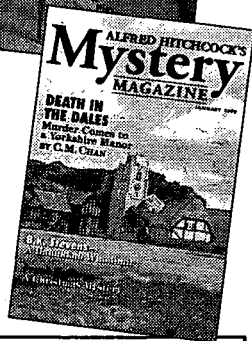
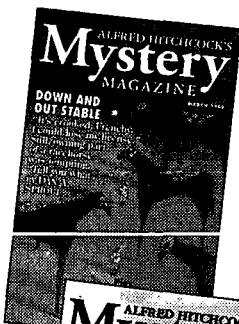
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by Anne Regalia

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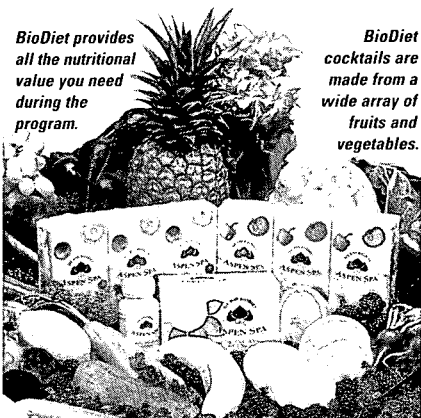
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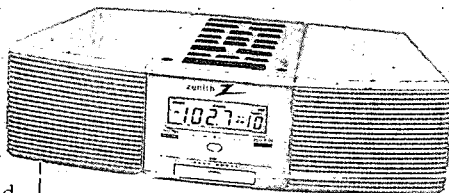
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